Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

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THE C-CHUTE By ISAAC ASIMOV

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Galaxy
SCIENCE FICTION

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Use Before Shaking

IT has been suggested that hundreds of urgent topics are beseeching the editorial pages of, among other things, science fiction magazines.

I find it surprising. If a science fiction magazine has a viewpoint—a dangerous thing, tending to harden into glaucoma—it should be apparent in the stories. The ability to put his maunderings into type may be tempting to an editor, but the fact is that they are immeasurably stronger in stories than in solid pages of rhetoric. They are also less dull.

However, since a statement of policy is closely related to science fiction, here it is:

GALAXY is for democracy, human decency and dignity, peace, progress, scientific advance, better standards of living, education, international and intergroup relations, and individual awareness.

That last point may be confusing, and I'm glad to have a chance to explain. Through submitted stories and letters, and articles in fan magazines, I've encountered instances of anger so disproportionate to cause that the vehicles actually amount to case histories. Some of the anger was directed at our subscription department when we were getting organized and some errors were inevitable; at my rejecting stories that were not suitable for one reason or another; at editorials stating goals, and ads declaring that GALAXY is a good magazine, which were construed as bragging.

This is not to excuse any of the offending practices. Our sub department is working out its problems; for every reader who objects to editorial discussion of aims, rubs and successes, there are literally hundreds who approve; promotion, whether fortunately or unfortunately, is a necessity for any product; and I could promise to buy all stories submitted, but I won't.

Thus GALAXY is for individual awareness: A psychiatric axiom is that suicides in almost all cases want to kill someone else; anyone who attacks an inanimate object or a distant, unknown person is sore at somebody nearer home.

To continue, however:

GALAXY is against tyranny of any sort whatever, human degradation, inhuman war, repudiation of science or any other aspect of progress, lower standards of living, education, international

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and intergroup relations, individual unawareness, and bad stories.

Note that GALAXY is against *inhuman* wars. Some wars must be fought, which is a controversial statement. Passive resistance may win under certain conditions, though I doubt if it can against a brutalized oppressor, but, passive or otherwise, it is still war. Humanity would be in even worse shape than it is if it had not fought its just wars.

Matter of fact, the shape humanity is in is cause for worry, I believe, but not the kind of paralyzing terror that clutches science fiction writers in particular, every time they think of it.

A Pollyanna attitude would be silly. On the other hand, so is irrational fright. It's hard to recall many ages that didn't face what they regarded as imminent destruction. Their threats were barbarians, great plagues, sorcery in all its fearful forms, uncheckable fire, flood, famine. Ours is mainly atomic and bacteriological warfare, and cancer.

Even assuming war must come, which is not a certainty, and that it will use the awful weapons that science has provided, just how bad would it be?

Well, destroying the entire United States would take untold thousands of bombs. For the whole world—there isn't that much fissionable material. And remember that artificial radioactivity does not make areas uninhabitable for more than a matter of months, or a few years at the very most. So no less than hundreds of millions of people would survive, and civilization safeguarded.

Nor, actually, is the individual prospect for survival bad, outside the big cities, *maybe*.

However, radioactive and biological warfare, like poison gas, is more likely *not* to be used for fear of reprisal.

Cancer? Techniques now in use are very effective, and more are on their way.

In any case, which would you prefer—the Black Plague, with no countermeasures at all, or today's perils, with the enormous resources of laboratory and hospital? How much of our fear is internal, hung on atomic war and cancer, that in other ages would have clung to plagues and barbarians?

The opinions contained herein are not to be considered guarantees. Remember the hotheads mentioned earlier, who have their counterparts in the governments and armed forces of nations. But if logic means anything, mankind is in no greater danger than it's been in throughout history—and with greater knowledge and technology for protection.

— H. L. GOLD

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The C-Chute

By ISAAC ASIMOV

The spaceship had to be recaptured from the aliens, which meant that somebody had to be a hero. But who would that be . . . and why?

EVEN from the cabin into which he and the other passengers had been herded, Colonel Anthony Windham could still catch the essence of the battle's progress. For a while, there was silence, no jolting, which meant the spaceships were fighting at astronomical distance in a duel of energy blasts and powerful force-field defenses.

He knew that could have only one end. Their Earth ship was only an armed merchantman and his glimpse of the Kloro enemy just before he had been cleared off deck by the crew was sufficient to show it to be a light cruiser.

And in less than half an hour,

Illustrated by DAVID STONE

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there came those hard little shocks he was waiting for. The passengers swayed back and forth as the ship pitched and veered, as though it were an ocean liner in a storm. But space was calm and silent as ever. It was their pilot sending desperate bursts of steam through the steam-tubes, so that by reaction the ship would be sent rolling and tumbling. It could only mean that the inevitable had occurred. The Earth ship's screens had been drained and it no longer dared withstand a direct hit.

Colonel Windham tried to steady himself with his aluminum cane. He was thinking that he was an old man; that he had spent his life in the militia and had never seen a battle; that now, with a battle going on around him, he was old and fat and lame and had no men under his command.

They would be boarding soon, those Kloro monsters. It was their way of fighting. They would be handicapped by spacesuits and their casualties would be high, but they wanted the Earth ship. Windham considered the passengers. For a moment, he thought, *if they were armed and I could lead them—*

He abandoned the thought. Porter was in an obvious state of funk and the young boy, Leblanc, was hardly better. The Polyorketes brothers—dash it, he *couldn't* tell them apart—huddled in a corner speaking only to one another. Mullen was a different matter. He sat perfectly erect, with no signs of fear or any other emotion in his face. But the man was just about five feet tall and had undoubtedly never held a gun of any sort in his hands in all his life. He could do nothing.

And there was Stuart, with his frozen half-smile and the high-pitched sarcasm which saturated all he said. Windham looked sidelong at Stuart now as Stuart sat there, pushing his dead-white hands through his sandy hair. With those artificial hands he was useless, anyway.

Windham felt the shuddering vibration of ship-to-ship contact; and in five minutes, there was the noise of the fight through the corridors. One of the Polyorketes brothers screamed and dashed for the door. The other called, "Aristides! Wait!" and hurried after.

It happened so quickly. Aristides was out the door and into the corridor, running in brainless panic. A carbonizer glowed briefly and there was never even a scream. Windham, from the doorway, turned in horror at the blackened stump of what was left. Strange—a lifetime in uniform and he had never before seen a man killed in violence.

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It took the combined force of he rest to carry the other brother back struggling into the room.

The noise of battle subsided.

Stuart said, "That's it. They'll put a prize crew of two aboard and take us to one of their home planets. We're prisoners of war, naturally."

"Only two of the Kloros will stay aboard?" asked Windham, astonished.

Stuart said, "It is their custom. Why do you ask, Colonel? Thinking of leading a gallant raid to retake the ship?"

Windham flushed. "Simply a point of information, dash it." But the dignity and tone of authority he tried to assume failed him, he knew. He was simply an old man with a limp.

And Stuart was probably right. He had lived among the Kloros and knew their ways.

JOHN Stuart had claimed from the beginning that the Kloros were gentlemen. Twenty-four hours of imprisonment had passed, and now he repeated the statement as he flexed the fingers of his hands and watched the crinkles come and go in the soft artiplasm.

He enjoyed the unpleasant reaction it aroused in the others. People were made to be punctured; windy bladders, all of them. And they had hands of the same stuff as their bodies.

There was Anthony Windham, in particular. Colonel Windham, he called himself, and Stuart was willing to believe it. A retired colonel who had probably drilled a home guard militia on a village green, forty years ago, with such lack of distinction that he was not called back to service in any capacity, even during the emergency of Earth's first interstellar war.

"Dashed unpleasant thing to be saying about the enemy, Stuart. Don't know that I like your attitude." Windham seemed to push the words through his clipped mustache. His head had been shaven, too, in imitation of the current military style, but now a gray stubble was beginning to show about a centered bald patch. His flabby cheeks dragged downward. That and the fine red lines on his thick nose gave him a somewhat undone appearance, as though he had been wakened too suddenly and too early in the morning.

Stuart said, "Nonsense. Just reverse the present situation. Suppose an Earth warship had taken a Kloro liner. What do you think would have happened to any Kloro civilians aboard?"

"I'm sure the Earth fleet would observe all the interstellar rules of war," Windham said stiffly.

"Except that there aren't any.

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If we landed a prize crew on one of their ships, do you think we'd take the trouble to maintain a chlorine atmosphere for the benefit of the survivors; allow them to keep their non-contraband possessions; give them the use of the most comfortable stateroom, etcetera, etcetera, etcetera?"

Ben Porter said, "Oh, shut up, for God's sake. If I hear your etcetera, etcetera once again, I'll go nuts."

Stuart said, "Sorry!" He wasn't.

Porter was scarcely responsible. His thin face and beaky nose glistened with perspiration, and he kept biting the inside of his cheek until he suddenly winced. He put his tongue against the sore spot, which made him look even more clownish.

Stuart was growing weary of baiting them. Windham was too flabby a target and Porter could do nothing but writhe. The rest were silent. Demetrios Polyorketes was off in a world of silent internal grief for the moment. He had not slept the night before, most probably. At least, whenever Stuart woke to change his position—he himself had been rather restless—there had been Polyorketes' thick mumble from the next cot. It said many things, but the moan to which it returned over and over again was, "Oh, my brother!"

He sat dumbly on his cot now, his red eyes rolling at the other prisoners out of his broad, swarthy, unshaven face. As Stuart watched, his face sank into calloused palms so that only his mop of crisp and curly black hair could be seen. He rocked gently, but now that they were all awake, he made no sound.

Claude Leblanc was trying very unsuccessfully, to read a letter. He was the youngest of the six, scarcely out of college, returning to Earth to get married. Stuart had found him that morning weeping quietly, his pink and white face flushed and blotched as though it were a heartbroken child's. He was very fair, with almost a girl's beauty about his large blue eyes and full lips. Stuart wondered what kind of girl it was who had promised to be his wife. He had seen her picture. Who on the ship had not? She had the characterless prettiness that makes all pictures of fiancees indistinguishable. It seemed to Stuart that if he were a girl, however, he would want someone a little more pronouncedly masculine.

That left only Randolph Mullen. Stuart frankly did not have the least idea what to make of him. He was the only one of the six that had been on the Arcturian worlds for any length of time. Stuart, himself, for instance, had been there only long enough

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to give a series of lectures on astronautical engineering at the provincial engineering institute. Colonel Windham had been on a Cook's tour; Porter was trying to buy concentrated alien vegetables for his canneries on Earth; and the Polyorketes brothers had attempted to establish themselves in Arcturus as truck farmers and, after two growing seasons, gave it up, had somehow unloaded at a profit, and were returning to Earth.

Randolph Mullen, however, had been in the Arcturian system for seventeen years. How did voyagers discover so much about one another so quickly? As far as Stuart knew, the little man had scarcely spoken aboard ship. He was unfailingly polite, always stepped to one side to allow another to pass, but his entire vocabularly appeared to consist only of "Thank you" and "Pardon me." Yet the word had gone around that this was his first trip to Earth in seventeen years.

He was a little man, very precise, almost irritatingly so. Upon awaking that morning, he had made his cot neatly, shaved, bathed and dressed. The habit of years seemed not in the least disturbed by the fact that he was a prisoner of the Kloros now. He was unobtrusive about it, it had to be admitted, and gave no impression of disapproving of the sloppiness of the others. He simply sat there, almost apologetic, trussed in his overconservative clothing, and hands loosely clasped in his lap. The thin line of hair on his upper lip, far from adding character to his face, absurdly increased its primness.

He looked like someone's idea of a caricature of a bookkeeper. And the queer thing about it all, Stuart thought, was that that was exactly what he was. He had noticed it on the registry—Randolph Fluellen Mullen; occupation, bookkeeper; employers, Prime Paper Box Co.; 27 Tobias Avenue, New Warsaw, Arcturus II.

"MR. Stuart?"

Stuart looked up. It was Leblanc, his lower lip trembling slightly. Stuart tried to remember how one went about being gentle. He said, "What is it, Leblanc?"

"Tell me, when will they let us go?"

"How should I know?"

"Everyone says you lived on a Kloro planet, and just now you said they were gentlemen."

"Well, yes. But even gentlemen fight wars in order to win. Probably, we'll be interned for the duration."

"But that could be *years!* Margaret is waiting. She'll think I'm *dead!*"

"I suppose they'll allow mes-

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sages to be sent through once we're on their planet."

Porter's hoarse voice sounded in agitation. "Look here, if you know so much about these devils, what will they do to us while we're interned? What will they feed us? Where will they get oxygen for us? They'll kill us, I tell you." And as an afterthought, "I've got a wife waiting for me, too," he added.

But Stuart had heard him speaking of his wife in the days before the attack. He wasn't impressed. Porter's nail-bitten fingers were pulling and plucking at Stuart's sleeve. Stuart drew away in sharp revulsion. He couldn't stand those ugly hands. It angered him to desperation that such monstrosities should be real while his own white and perfectly shaped hands were only mocking imitations grown out of an alien latex.

He said, "They won't kill us. If they were going to, they would have done it before now. Look, we capture Kloros too, you know, and it's just a matter of common sense to treat your prisoners decently if you want the other side to be decent to your men. They'll do their best. The food may not be very good, but they're better chemists than we are. It's what they're best at. They'll know exactly what food factors we'll need and how many calories. We'll live. They'll see to that."

Windham rumbled, "You sound more and more like a blasted greenie sympathizer, Stuart. It turns my stomach to hear an Earthman speak well of the green fellas the way you've been doing. Burn it, man, where's your loyalty?"

"My loyalty's where it belongs. With honesty and decency, regardless of the shape of the being it appears in." Stuart held up his hands. "See these? Kloros made them. I lived on one of their planets for six months. My hands were mangled in the conditioning machinery of my own quarters. I thought the oxygen supply they gave me was a little poor—it wasn't, by the way—and I tried making the adjustments on my own. It was my fault. You should never trust yourself with the machines of another culture. By the time someone among the Kloros could put on an atmosphere suit and get to me, it was too late to save my hands.

"They grew these artiplasm things for me and operated. You know what that meant? It meant designing equipment and nutrient solutions that would work in oxygen atmosphere. It meant that their surgeons had to perform a delicate operation while dressed in atmosphere suits. And now I've got hands again." He laughed harshly, and clenched them into

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weak fists. "Hands—"

Windham said, "And you'd sell your loyalty to Earth for that?"

"Sell my loyalty? You're mad. For years, I hated the Kloros for this. I was a master pilot on the Trans-Galactic Spacelines before it happened. Now? Desk job. Or an occasional lecture. It took me a long time to pin the fault on myself and to realize that the only role played by the Kloros was a decent one. They have their code of ethics, and it's as good as ours. If it weren't for the stupidity of some of their people—and, by God, of some of ours — we wouldn't be at war. And after it's over—"

Polyorketes was on his feet. His thick fingers curved inward before him and his dark eyes glittered. "I don't like what you say, mister."

"Why don't you?"

"Because you talk too nice about these damned green bastards. The Kloros were good to you, eh? Well, they weren't good to my brother. They killed him. I think maybe I kill you, you damned greenie spy."

And he charged.

Stuart barely had time to raise his arms to meet the infuriated farmer. He gasped out, "What the hell—" as he caught one wrist and heaved a shoulder to block the other which groped toward his throat.

His artiplasm hand gave way. Polyorketes wrenched free with scarcely an effort.

Windham was bellowing incoherently, and Leblanc was calling out in his reedy voice, "Stop it! Stop it!" But it was little Mullen who threw his arms about the farmer's neck from behind and pulled with all his might. He was not very effective; Polyorketes seemed scarcely aware of the little man's weight upon his back. Mullen's feet left the floor so that he tossed helplessly to right and left. But he held his grip and it hampered Polyorketes sufficiently to allow Stuart to break free long enough to grasp Windham's aluminum cane.

He said, "Stay away, Polyorketes."

He was gasping for breath and fearful of another rush. The hollow aluminum cylinder was scarcely heavy enough to accomplish much, but it was better than having only his weak hands to defend himself with.

Mullen had loosed his hold and was now circling cautiously, his breathing roughened and his jacket in disarray.

Polyorketes, for a moment, did not move. He stood there, his shaggy head bent low. Then he said, "It is no use. I must kill Kloros. Just watch your tongue, Stuart. If it keeps on rattling too much, you're liable to get hurt.

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Really hurt, I mean."

Stuart passed a forearm over his forehead and thrust the cane back at Windham, who seized it with his left hand, while mopping his bald pate vigorously with a handkerchief in his right.

Windham said, "Gentlemen, we must avoid this. It lowers our prestige. We must remember the common enemy. We are Earthmen and we must act what we are—the ruling race of the Galaxy. We dare not demean ourselves before the lesser breeds."

"Yes, Colonel," said Stuart, wearily. "Give us the rest of the speech tomorrow."

He turned to Mullen, "I want to say thanks."

He was uncomfortable about it, but he had to. The little accountant had surprised him completely.

But Mullen said, in a dry voice that scarcely raised above a whisper, "Don't thank me, Mr. Stuart. It was the logical thing to do. If we are to be interned, we would need you as an interpreter, perhaps, one who would understand the Kloros."

Stuart stiffened. It was, he thought, too much the bookkeeper type of reasoning, too logical, too dry of juice. Present risk and ultimate advantage. The assets and debits balanced neatly. He would have liked Mullen to leap to his defense out of—well, out of what? Out of pure, unselfish decency?

Stuart laughed silently at himself. He was beginning to expect idealism of human beings, rather than good, straightforward, self-centered motivation.

POLYORKETES was numb. His sorrow and rage were like acid inside him, but they had no words to get out. If he were Stuart, big-mouth, white-hands Stuart, he could talk and talk and maybe feel better. Instead, he had to sit there with half of him dead; with no brother, no Aristides—

It had happened so quickly. If he could only go back and have one second more warning, so that he might snatch Aristides, hold him, save him.

But mostly he hated the Kloros. Two months ago, he had hardly ever heard of them, and now he hated them so hard, he would be glad to die if he could kill a few.

He said, without looking up, "What happened to start this war, eh?"

He was afraid Stuart's voice would answer. He hated Stuart's voice. But it was Windham, the bald one.

Windham said, "The immediate cause, sir, was a dispute over mining concessions in the Wyandotte system. The Kloros had poached on Earth property."

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"Room for both, Colonel!"

Polyorketes looked up at that, snarling. Stuart could not be kept quiet for long. He was speaking again; the cripple-hand, wiseguy, Kloros-lover.

Stuart was saying, "Is that anything to fight over, Colonel? We can't use one another's worlds. Their chlorine planets are useless to us and our oxygen ones are useless to them. Chlorine is deadly to us and oxygen is deadly to them. There's no way we could maintain permanent hostility. Our races just don't coincide. Is there reason to fight then because both races want to dig iron out of the same airless planetoids when there are millions like them in the Galaxy?"

Windham said, "There is the question of planetary honor—"

"Planetary fertilizer. How can it excuse a ridiculous war like this one? It can only be fought on outposts. It has to come down to a series of holding actions and eventually be settled by negotiations that might just as easily have been worked out in the first place. Neither we nor the Kloros will gain a thing."

Grudgingly, Polyorketes found that he agreed with Stuart. What did he and Aristides care where Earth or the Kloros got their iron?

Was that something for Aristides to die over?

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The little warning buzzer sounded.

Polyorketes' head shot up and he rose slowly, his lips drawing back. Only one thing could be at the door. He waited, arms tense, fists balled. Stuart was edging toward him. Polyorketes saw that and laughed to himself. Let the Kloro come in, and Stuart, along with all the rest, could not stop him.

Wait, Aristides, wait just a moment, and a fraction of revenge will be paid back.

THE door opened and a figure entered, completely swathed in a shapeless, billowing travesty of a spacesuit.

An odd, unnatural, but not entirely unpleasant voice began, "It is with some misgivings, Earthmen, that my companion and myself—"

It ended abruptly as Polyorketes, with a roar, charged once again. There was no science in the lunge. It was sheer bull-momentum. Dark head low, burly arms spread out with the hair-tufted fingers in choking position, he clumped on. Stuart was whirled to one side before he had a chance to intervene, and was spun tumbling across a cot.

The Kloro might have, without undue exertion, straight-armed Polyorketes to a halt, or stepped aside, allowing the whirlwind to

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pass. He did neither. With a rapid movement, a hand-weapon was up and a gentle pinkish line of radiance connected it with the plunging Earthman. Polyorketes stumbled and crashed down, his body maintaining its last curved position, one foot raised, as though a lightning paralysis had taken place. It toppled to one side and he lay there, eyes all alive and wild with rage.

The Kloro said, "He is not permanently hurt." He seemed not to resent the offered violence. Then he began again, "It is with some misgiving, Earthmen, that my companion and myself were made aware of a certain commotion in this room. Are you in any need which we can satisfy?"

Stuart was angrily nursing his knee which he had scraped in colliding with the cot. He said. "No, thank you, Kloro."

"Now, look here," puffed Windham, "this is a dashed outrage. We demand that our release be arranged."

The Kloro's tiny, insectlike head turned in the fat old man's direction. He was not a pleasant sight to anyone unused to him. He was about the height of an Earthman, but the top of him consisted of a thin stalk of a neck with a head that was the merest swelling. It consisted of a blunt triangular proboscis in front and two bulging eyes on either side. That was all. There was no brain pan and no brain. What corresponded to the brain in a Kloro was located in what would be an Earthly abdomen, leaving the head as a mere sensory organ. The Kloro's spacesuit followed the outlines of the head more or less faithfully, the two eyes being exposed by two clear semicircles of glass, which looked faintly green because of the chlorine atmosphere inside.

One of the eyes was now cocked squarely at Windham, who quivered uncomfortably under the glance, but insisted, "You have no right to hold us prisoner. We are noncombatants."

The Kloro's voice, sounding thoroughly artificial, came from a small attachment of chromium mesh on what served as its chest. The voice box was manipulated by compressed air under the control of one or two of the many delicate, forked tendrils that radiated from two circles about its upper body and were, mercifully enough, hidden by the suit.

The voice said, "Are you serious, Earthman? Surely you have heard of war and rules of war and prisoners of war."

It looked about, shifting eyes with quick jerks of its head, staring at a particular object first with one, then with another. It was Stuart's understanding that each eye transferred a separate

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message to the abdominal brain, which had to coordinate the two to obtain full information.

Windham had nothing to say. No one had. The Kloro, its four main limbs, roughly arms and legs in pairs, had a vaguely human appearance under the masking of the suit, if you looked no higher than its chest, but there was no way of telling what it felt.

They watched it turn and leave.

PORTER coughed and said in a strangled voice, "God, smell that chlorine. If they don't do something, we'll all die of rotted lungs."

Stuart said, "Shut up. There isn't enough chlorine in the air to make a mosquito sneeze, and what there is will be swept out in two minutes. Besides, a little chlorine is good for you. It may kill your cold virus."

Windham coughed and said, "Stuart, I feel that you might have said something to your Kloro friend about releasing us. You are scarcely as bold in their presence, dash it, as you are once they are gone."

"You heard what the creature said, Colonel. We're prisoners of war, and prisoner exchanges are negotiated by diplomats. We'll just have to wait."

Leblanc, who had turned pasty white at the entrance of the Kloro, rose and hurried into the privy. There was the sound of retching.

An uncomfortable silence fell while Stuart tried to think of something to say to cover the unpleasant sound. Mullen filled in. He had rummaged through a little box he had taken from under his pillow.

He said, "Perhaps Mr. Leblanc had better take a sedative before retiring. I have a few. I'd be glad to give him one." He explained his generosity immediately, "Otherwise he may keep the rest of us awake, you see."

"Very logical," said Stuart, dryly. "You'd better save one for Sir Launcelot here; save half a dozen." He walked to where Polyorketes still sprawled and knelt at his side. "Comfortable, baby?"

Windham said, "Deuced poor taste speaking like that, Stuart."

"Well, if you're so concerned about him, why don't you and Porter hoist him onto his cot?"

He helped them do so. Polyorketes' arms were trembling erratically now. From what Stuart knew of the Kloro's nerve weapons, the man should be in an agony of pins and needles about now.

Stuart said, "And don't be too gentle with him, either. The damned fool might have gotten us all killed. And for what?"

He pushed Polyorketes' stiff carcass to one side and sat at the edge of the cot. He said, "Can

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you hear me, Polyorketes?"

Polyorketes' eyes gleamed. An arm lifted abortively and fell back.

"Okay then, listen. Don't try anything like that again. The next time it may be the finish for all of us. If you had been a Kloro and he had been an Earthman, we'd be dead now. So just get one thing through your skull. We're sorry about your brother and it's a rotten shame, but it was his own fault."

Polyorketes tried to heave and Stuart pushed him back.

"No, you keep on listening," he said. "Maybe this is the only time I'll get to talk to you when you *have* to listen. Your brother had no right leaving passenger's quarters. There was no place for him to go. He just got in the way of our own men. We don't even know for certain that it was a Kloro gun that killed him. It might have been one of our own."

"Oh, I say, Stuart," objected Windham.

Stuart whirled at him. "Do you have proof it wasn't? Did you see the shot? Could you tell from what was left of the body whether it was Kloro energy or Earth energy?"

Polyorketes found his voice, driving his unwilling tongue into a fuzzy verbal snarl. "Damned stinking greenie bastard."

"Me?" said Stuart. "I know what's going on in your mind, Polyorketes. You think that when the paralysis wears off, you'll ease your feelings by slamming me around. Well, if you do, it will probably be curtains for all of us."

He rose, put his back against the wall. For the moment, he was fighting all of them. "None of you know the Kloros the way I do. The physical differences you see are not important. The differences in their temperament are. They don't understand our views on sex, for instance. To them, it's just a biological reflex like breathing. They attach no importance to it. But they *do* attach importance to social groupings. Remember, their evolutionary ancestors had lots in common with our insects. They always assume that any group of Earthmen they find together makes up a social unit.

"That means just about everything to them. I don't understand exactly *what* it means. No Earthman can. But the result is that they never break up a group, just as we don't separate a mother and her children if we can help it. One of the reasons they're treating us with kid gloves right now is that they imagine we're all broken up over the fact that they killed one of us, and they feel guilt about it.

"But this is what you'll have to remember. We're going to be

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interned together and *kept* together for duration. I don't like the thought. I wouldn't have picked any of you for co-internees and I'm pretty sure none of you would have picked me. But there it is. The Kloros could never understand that our being together on the ship is only accidental.

"That means we've got to get along somehow. That's not just goodie-goodie talk about birds in their little nests agreeing. What do you think would have happened if the Kloros had come in earlier and found Polyorketes and myself trying to kill each other? You don't know? Well, what do you suppose *you* would think of a mother you caught trying to kill her children?

"That's it, then. They would have killed every one of us as a bunch of Kloro-type perverts and monsters. Got that? How about you, Polyorketes? Have *you* got it? So let's call names if we have to, but let's keep our hands to ourselves. And now, if none of you mind, I'll massage my hands back into shape—these synthetic hands that I got from the Kloros and that one of my own kind tried to mangle again."

FOR Claude Leblanc, the worst was over. He had been sick enough; sick with many things; but sick most of all over having ever left Earth. It had been a great thing to go to college off Earth. It had been an adventure and had taken him away from his mother. Somehow, he had been sneakingly glad to make that escape after the first month of frightened adjustment.

And then on the summer holidays, he had been no longer Claude, the shy-spoken scholar, but Leblanc, space traveler. He had swaggered the fact for all it was worth. It made him feel such a man to talk of stars and Jumps and the customs and environments of other worlds; it had given him courage with Margaret. She had loved him for the dangers he had undergone—

Except that this had been the first one, really, and he had not done so well. He knew it and was ashamed and wished he were like Stuart.

He used the excuse of mealtime to approach. He said, "Mr. Stuart."

Stuart looked up and said shortly, "How do you feel?"

Leblanc felt himself blush. He blushed easily and the effort not to blush only made it worse. He said, "Much better, thank you. We are eating. I thought I'd bring you your ration."

Stuart took the offered can. It was standard space ration; thoroughly synthetic, concentrated, nourishing and, somehow, unsat-

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isfying. It heated automatically when the can was opened, but could be eaten cold, if necessary. Though a combined fork-spoon utensil was enclosed, the ration was of a consistency that made the use of fingers practical and not particularly messy.

Stuart said, "Did you hear my little speech?"

"Yes, sir. I want you to know you can count on me."

"Well, good. Now go and eat."

"May I eat here?"

"Suit yourself."

For a moment, they ate in silence, and then Leblanc burst out, "You are so sure of yourself, Mr. Stuart! It must be very wonderful to be like that!"

"Sure of myself? Thanks, but there's your self-assured one."

Leblanc followed the direction of the nod in surprise. "Mr. Mullen? That little man? Oh, no!"

"You don't think he's self-assured?"

Leblanc shook his head. He looked at Stuart intently to see if he could detect humor in his expression. "That one is just cold. He has no emotion in him. He's like a little machine. I find him repulsive. You're different, Mr. Stuart. You have it all inside, but you control it. I would like to be like that."

And as though attracted by the magnetism of the mention, even though unheard, of his name, Mullen joined them. His can of ration was barely touched. It was still steaming gently as he squatted opposite them.

His voice had its usual quality of furtively rustling underbrush. "How long, Mr. Stuart, do you think the trip will take?"

"Can't say, Mullen. They'll undoubtedly be avoiding the usual trade routes and they'll be making more Jumps through hyperspace than usual to throw off possible pursuit. I wouldn't be surprised if it took as long as a week. Why do you ask? I presume you have a very practical and logical reason?"

"Why, yes. Certainly." He seemed quite shellbacked to sarcasm. He said, "It occurred to me that it might be wise to ration the rations, so to speak."

"We've got enough food and water for a month. I checked on that first thing."

"I see. In that case, I will finish the can." He did, using the all-purpose utensil daintily and patting a handkerchief against his unstained lips from time to time.

POLYORKETES struggled to his feet some two hours later. He swayed a bit, looking like the Spirit of Hangover. He did not try to come closer to Stuart, but spoke from where he stood.

He said, "You stinking greenie

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spy, you watch yourself."

"You heard what I said before, Polyorketes."

"I heard. But I also heard what you said about Aristides. I won't bother with you, because you're a bag of nothing but noisy air. But wait, someday you'll blow your air in one face too many and it will be let out of you."

"I'll wait," said Stuart.

Windham hobbled over, leaning heavily on his cane. "Now, now," he called with a wheezing joviality that overlaid his sweating anxiety so thinly as to emphasize it. "We're all Earthmen, dash it. Got to remember that; keep it as a glowing light of inspiration. Never let down before the blasted Kloros. We've got to forget private feuds and remember only that we are Earthmen united against alien blighters."

Stuart's comment was unprintable.

Porter was right behind Windham. He had been in a close conference with the shaven-headed colonel for an hour, and now he said with indignation. "It doesn't help to be a wiseguy, Stuart. You listen to the colonel. We've been doing some hard thinking about the situation."

He had washed some of the grease off his face, wet his hair and slicked it back. It did not remove the little tic on his right cheek just at the point where his lips ended, or make his hangnail hands more attractive in appearance.

"All right, Colonel," said Stuart. "What's on your mind?"

Windham said, "I'd prefer to have all the men together."

"Okay, call them."

Leblanc hurried over; Mullen approached with greater deliberation.

Stuart said, "You want that fellow?" He jerked his head at Polyorketes.

"Why, yes. Mr. Polyorketes, may we have you, old fella?"

"Ah, leave me alone."

"Go ahead," said Stuart, "leave him alone. I don't want him."

"No, no," said Windham. "This is a matter for all Earthmen. Mr. Polyorketes, we must have you."

Polyorketes rolled off one side of his cot. "I'm close enough. I can hear you."

Windham said to Stuart, "Would they—the Kloros, I mean—have this room wired?"

"No," said Stuart. "Why should they?"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure. They didn't know what happened when Polyorketes jumped me. They just heard the thumping when it started rattling the ship."

"Maybe they were trying to give us the impression the room wasn't wired."

"Listen, Colonel, I've never

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known a Kloro to tell a deliberate lie—"

Polyorketes interrupted calmly, "That lump of noise just *loves* the Kloros."

Windham said hastily, "Let's not begin that. Look, Stuart, Porter and I have been discussing matters and we have decided that you know the Kloros well enough to think of some way of getting us back to Earth."

"It happens that you're wrong. I can't think of any way."

"Maybe there is some way we can take the ship back from the blasted green fellas," suggested Windham. "Some weakness they may have. Dash it, you know what I mean."

"Tell me, Colonel, what are you after? Your own skin or Earth's welfare?"

"I resent that question. I'll have you know that while I'm as careful of my own life as anyone has a right to be, I'm thinking of Earth primarily. And I think that's true of all of us."

"Damn right," said Porter, instantly. Leblanc looked anxious, Polyorketes resentful; and Mullen had no expression at all.

"Good," said Stuart. "Of course, I don't think we can take the ship. They're armed and we aren't. But there's this. You know why the Kloros took this ship intact. It's because they need ships. They may be better chemists than Earthmen are, but Earthmen are better astronautical engineers. We have bigger, better and more ships. In fact, if our crew had had a proper respect for military axioms in the first place, they would have blown the ship up as soon as it looked as though the Kloros were going to board."

Leblanc looked horrified. "And kill the passengers?"

"Why not? You heard what the good colonel said. Every one of us puts his own lousy little life after Earth's interests. What good are we to Earth alive right now? None at all. What harm will this ship do in Kloro hands? A hell of a lot, probably."

"Just why," asked Mullen, "did our men refuse to blow up the ship? They must have had a reason."

"They did. It's the firmest tradition of Earth's military men that there must never be an unfavorable ratio of casualties. If we had blown ourselves up, twenty fighting men and seven civilians of Earth would be dead as compared with an enemy casualty total of zero. So what happens? We let them board, kill twenty-eight—I'm sure we killed at least that many—and let them have the ship."

"Talk, talk, talk," jeered Polyorketes.

"There's a moral to this," said Stuart. "We can't take the ship

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away from the Kloros. We *might* be able to rush them, though, and keep them busy long enough to allow one of us enough time to short the engines."

"What?" yelled Porter, and Windham shushed him in fright.

"Short the engines," Stuart repeated. "That would destroy the ship, of course, which is what we want to do, isn't it?"

Leblanc's lips were white. "I don't think that would work."

"We can't be sure till we try. But what have we to lose by trying?"

"Our lives, damn it!" cried Porter. "You insane maniac, you're crazy!"

"If I'm a maniac," said Stuart, "and insane to boot, then naturally I'm crazy. But just remember that if we lose our lives, which is overwhelmingly probable, we lose nothing of value to Earth; whereas if we destroy the ship, as we just barely might, we do Earth a lot of good. What patriot would hesitate? Who here would put himself ahead of his world?" He looked about in the silence. "Surely not you, Colonel Windham."

Windham coughed tremendously. "My dear man, that is not the question. There must be a way to save the ship for Earth *without* losing our lives, eh?"

"All right. *You* name it."

"Let's all think about it. Now there are only two of the Kloros aboard ship. If one of us could sneak up on them and—"

"How? The rest of the ship's all filled with chlorine. We'd have to wear a spacesuit. Gravity in their part of the ship is hopped up to Kloro level, so whoever is patsy in the deal would be clumping around, metal on metal, slow and heavy. Oh, he could sneak up on them, sure—like a skunk trying to sneak downwind."

"Then we'll drop it all," Porter's voice shook. "Listen, Windham, there's not going to be any destroying the ship. My life means plenty to me and if any of you try anything like that, I'll call the Kloros. I mean it."

"Well," said Stuart, "there's hero number one."

Leblanc said, "I want to go back to Earth, but I—"

Mullen interrupted, "I don't think our chances of destroying the ship are good enough unless—"

"Heroes number two and three. What about you, Polyorketes? You would have the chance of killing two Kloros."

"I want to kill them with my bare hands," growled the farmer, his heavy fists writhing. "On their planet, I will kill dozens."

"That's a nice safe promise for now. What about you, Colonel? Don't you want to march to death and glory with me?"

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"Your attitude is very cynical and unbecoming, Stuart. It's obvious that if the rest are unwilling, then your plan will fall through."

"Unless I do it myself, huh?"

"You won't, do you hear?" said Porter, instantly.

"Damn right I won't," agreed Stuart. "I don't claim to be a hero. I'm just an average patriot, perfectly willing to head for any planet they take me to and sit out the war."

MULLEN said, thoughtfully, "Of course, there *is* a way we could surprise the Kloros."

The statement would have dropped flat except for Polyorketes. He pointed a black-nailed, stubby forefinger and laughed harshly. "Mr. Bookkeeper!" he said. "Mr. Bookkeeper is a big shot talker like this damned greenie spy, Stuart. All right, Mr. Bookkeeper, go ahead. You make big speeches also. Let the words roll like an empty barrel."

He turned to Stuart and repeated venomously, "Empty barrel! Cripple-hand empty barrel. No good for anything but talk."

Mullen's soft voice could make no headway until Polyorketes was through, but then he said, speaking directly to Stuart, "We might be able to reach them from outside. This room has a C-chute, I'm sure."

"What's a C-chute?" asked Leblanc.

"Well—" began Mullen, and then stopped, at a loss.

Stuart said, mockingly, "It's a euphemism, my boy. Its full name is 'casualty chute.' It doesn't get talked about, but the main rooms on any ship would have them. They're just little airlocks down which you slide a corpse. Burial at space. Always lots of sentiment and bowed heads, with the captain making a rolling speech of the type Polyorketes here wouldn't like."

Leblanc's face twisted. "Use *that* to leave the ship?"

"Why not? Superstitious?—Go on, Mullen."

The little man had waited patiently. He said, "Once outside, one could re-enter the ship by the steam-tubes. It can be done—with luck. And then you would be an unexpected visitor in the control room."

Stuart stared at him curiously. "How do you figure this out? What do *you* know about steam-tubes?"

Mullen coughed. "You mean because I'm in the paper-box business? Well—" He grew pink, waited a moment, then made a new start in a colorless, unemotional voice. "My company, which manufactures fancy paper boxes and novelty containers, made a line of spaceship candy

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boxes for the juvenile trade some years ago. It was designed so that if a string were pulled, small pressure containers were punctured and jets of compressed air shot out through the mock steam-tubes, sailing the box across the room and scattering candy as it went. The sales theory was that the youngsters would find it exciting to play with the ship and fun to scramble for the candy.

"Actually, it was a complete failure. The ship would break dishes and sometimes hit another child in the eye. Worse still, the children would not only scramble for the candy but would fight over it. It was almost our worst failure. We lost thousands.

"Still, while the boxes were being designed, the entire office was extremely interested. It was like a game, very bad for efficiency and office morale. For a while, we all became steam-tube experts. I read quite a few books on ship construction. On my own time, however, not the company's."

Stuart was intrigued. He said, "You know it's a video sort of idea, but it might work if we had a hero to spare. Have we?"

"What about you?" demanded Porter, indignantly. "You go around sneering at us with your cheap wisecracks. I don't notice you volunteering for anything."

"That's because I'm no hero, Porter. I admit it. My object is to stay alive, and shinnying down steam-tubes is no way to go about staying alive. But the rest of you are noble patriots. The Colonel says so. What about you, Colonel? You're the senior hero here."

Windham said, "If I were younger, blast it, and if you had your hands, I would take pleasure, sir, in trouncing you soundly."

"I've no doubt of it, but that's no answer."

"You know very well that at my time of life and with my leg—" he brought the flat of his hand down upon his stiff knee—"I am in no position to do anything of the sort, however much I should wish to."

"Ah, yes," said Stuart, "and I, myself, am crippled in the hands, as Polyorketes tells me. That saves us. And what unfortunate deformities do the rest of us have?"

"Listen," cried Porter, "I want to know what this is all about. How can anyone go down the steam-tubes? What if the Kloros use them while one of us is inside?"

"Why, Porter, that's part of the sporting chance. It's where the excitement comes in."

"But he'd be boiled in the shell like a lobster."

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"A pretty image, but inaccurate. The steam wouldn't be on for more than a very short time, maybe a second or two, and the suit insulation would hold that long. Besides, the jet comes scooting out at several hundred miles a minute, so that you would be blown clear of the ship before the steam could even warm you. In fact, you'd be blown quite a few miles out into space, and after that you would be quite safe from the Kloros. Of course, you couldn't get back to the ship."

Porter was sweating freely. "You don't scare me for one minute, Stuart."

"I don't? Then you're offering to go? Are you sure you've thought out what being stranded in space means? You're all alone, you know; really all alone. The steam-jet will probably leave you turning or tumbling pretty rapidly. You won't feel that. You'll seem to be motionless. But all the stars will be going around and around so that they're just streaks in the sky. They won't ever stop. They won't even slow up. Then your heater will go or your oxygen will give out, and you will die very slowly. You'll have lots of time to think. Or, if you are in a hurry, you could open your suit. That wouldn't be pleasant, either. I've seen the faces of men who had a torn suit happen to them accidentally, and it's pretty awful. But it would be quicker. Then—"

Porter turned and walked unsteadily away.

Stuart said, lightly, "Another failure. One act of heroism still ready to be knocked down to the highest bidder with nothing offered yet."

Polyorketes spoke up and his harsh voice roughed the words. "You keep on talking, Mr. Big Mouth. You just keep banging that empty barrel. Pretty soon, we'll kick your teeth in. There's one boy I think would be willing to do it now, eh, Mr. Porter?"

Porter's look at Stuart confirmed the truth of Polyorketes' remarks, but he said nothing.

Stuart said, "Then what about you, Polyorketes? You're the bare-hand man with guts. Want me to help you into a suit?"

"I'll ask you when I want help."

"What about you, Leblanc?"

The young man shrank away.

"Not even to get back to Margaret?"

But Leblanc could only shake his head.

"Mullen?"

"Well—I'll try."

"You'll what?"

"I said, yes, I'll try. After all, it's my idea."

Stuart looked stunned. "You're serious? How come?"

Mullen's prim mouth pursed. "Because no one else will."

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"But that's no reason. Especially for you."

Mullen shrugged.

There was a thump of a cane behind Stuart. Windham brushed past.

He said, "Do you really intend to go, Mullen?"

"Yes, Colonel."

"In that case, dash it, let me shake your hand. I like you. You're an — an Earthman, by heaven. Do this, and win or die, I'll bear witness for you."

Mullen withdrew his hand awkwardly from the deep and vibrating grasp of the other.

And Stuart just stood there. He was in a very unusual position. He was, in fact, in the particular position of all positions in which he most rarely found himself.

He had nothing to say.

THE quality of tension had changed. The gloom and frustration had lifted a bit, and the excitement of conspiracy had re-

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placed it. Even Polyorketes was fingering the spacesuits and commenting briefly and hoarsely on which he considered preferable..

Mullen was having a certain amount of trouble. The suit hung rather limply upon him even though the adjustable joints had been tightened nearly to minimum. He stood there now with only the helmet to be screwed on. He wiggled his neck.

Stuart was holding the helmet with an effort. It was heavy, and his artiplasmic hands did not grip it well. He said, "Better scratch your nose if it itches. It's your last chance for a while." He didn't add, "Maybe forever," but he thought it.

Mullen said, tonelessly, "I think perhaps I had better have a spare oxygen cylinder."

"Good enough."

"With a reducing valve."

Stuart nodded. "I see what you're thinking of. If you do get blown clear of the ship, you could try to blow yourself back by using the cylinder as an action-reaction motor."

They clamped on the headpiece and buckled the spare cylinder to Mullen's waist. Polyorketes and Leblanc lifted him up to the yawning opening of the C-tube. It was ominously dark inside, the metal lining of the interior having been painted a mournful black. Stuart thought he could detect a musty odor about it, but that, he knew, was only imagination.

He stopped the proceedings when Mullen was half within the tube. He tapped upon the little man's faceplate.

"Can you hear me?"

Within, there was a nod.

"Air coming through all right? No last-minute troubles?"

Mullen lifted his armored arm in a gesture of reassurance.

"Then remember, don't use the suit-radio out there. The Kloros might pick up the signals."

Reluctantly, he stepped away. Polyorketes' brawny hands lowered Mullen until they could hear the thumping sound made by the steel-shod feet against the outer valve. The inner valve then swung shut with a dreadful finality, its beveled silicone gasket making a slight soughing noise as it crushed hard. They clamped it into place.

Stuart stood at the toggle-switch that controlled the outer valve. He threw it and the gauge that marked the air pressure within the tube fell to zero. A little pinpoint of red light warned that the outer valve was open. Then the light disappeared, the valve closed, and the gauge climbed slowly to fifteen pounds again.

They opened the inner valve again and found the tube empty.

Polyorketes spoke first. He said,

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"The little son-of-a-gun. He went!" He looked wonderingly at the other. "A little fellow with guts like that."

Stuart said, "Look, we'd better get ready in here. There's just a chance that the Kloros may have detected the valves opening and closing. If so, they'll be here to investigate and we'll have to cover up."

"How?" asked Windham.

"They won't see Mullen anywhere around. We'll say he's in the head. The Kloros know that it's one of the peculiar characteristics of Earthmen that they resent intrusion on their privacy in lavatories, and they'll make no effort to check. If we can hold them off—"

"What if they wait, or if they check the spacesuits?" asked Porter.

Stuart shrugged. "Let's hope they don't. And listen, Polyorketes, don't make any fuss when they come in."

Polyorketes grunted, "With that little guy out there? What do you think I am?" He stared at Stuart without animosity, then scratched his curly hair vigorously. "You know, I laughed at him. I thought he was an old woman. It makes me ashamed."

Stuart cleared his throat. He said, "Look, I've been saying some things that maybe weren't too funny after all, now that I come to think of it. I'd like to say I'm sorry if I have."

He turned away morosely and walked toward his cot. He heard the steps behind him, felt the touch on his sleeve. He turned; it was Leblanc.

The youngster said softly, "I keep thinking that Mr. Mullen is an old man."

"Well, he's not a kid. He's about forty-five or fifty, I think."

Leblanc said, "Do you think, Mr. Stuart, that *I* should have gone, instead? I'm the youngest here. I don't like the thought of having let an old man go in my place. It makes me feel like the devil."

"I know. If he dies, it will be too bad."

"But he volunteered. We didn't make him, did we?"

"Don't try to dodge responsibility, Leblanc. It won't make you feel better. There isn't one of us without a stronger motive to run the risk than he had." And Stuart sat there silently, thinking.

MULLEN felt the obstruction beneath his feet yield and the walls about him slip away quickly, too quickly. He knew it was the puff of air escaping, carrying him with it, and he dug arms and legs frantically against the wall to brake himself. Corpses were supposed to be flung well clear of the ship, but he was no

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corpse—for the moment.

His feet swung free and threshed. He heard the *clunk* of one magnetic boot against the hull just as the rest of his body puffed out like a tight cork under air pressure. He teetered dangerously at the lip of the hole in the ship—he had changed orientation suddenly and was looking down on it—then took a step backward as its lid came down of itself and fitted smoothly against the hull.

A feeling of unreality overwhelmed him. Surely, it wasn't he standing on the outer surface of a ship. Not Randolph F. Mullen. So few human beings could ever say they had, even those who traveled in space constantly.

He was only gradually aware that he was in pain. Popping out of that hole with one foot clamped to the hull had nearly bent him in two. He tried moving, cautiously, and found his motions to be er-

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ratic and almost impossible to control. He *thought* nothing was broken, though the muscles of his left side were badly wrenched.

And then he came to himself and noticed that the wrist lights of his suit were on. It was by their light that he had stared into the blackness of the C-chute. He stirred with the nervous thought that from within, the Kloros might see the twin spots of moving light just outside the hull. He flicked the switch upon the suit's mid-section.

Mullen had never imagined that, standing on a ship, he would fail to see its hull. But it was dark, as dark below as above. There were the stars, hard and bright little non-dimensional dots. Nothing more. Nothing more anywhere. Under his feet, not even the stars—*not even his feet.*

He bent back to look at the stars. His head swam. They were moving slowly. Or, rather, they were standing still and the ship was rotating, but he could not tell his eyes that. *They* moved. His eyes followed—down and behind the ship. New stars up and above from the other side. A black horizon. The ship existed only as a region where there were no stars.

No stars? Why, there was one almost at his feet. He nearly reached for it; then he realized that it was only a glittering reflection in the mirroring metal.

They were moving thousands of miles an hour. The stars were. The ship was. He was. But it meant nothing. To his senses, there was only silence and darkness and that slow wheeling of the stars. His eyes followed the wheeling—

And his head in its helmet hit the ship's hull with a soft bell-like ring.

He felt about in panic with his thick, insensitive, spun-silicate gloves. His feet were still firmly magnetized to the hull, that was true, but the rest of his body bent backward at the knees in a right angle. There was no gravity outside the ship. If he bent back, there was nothing to pull the upper part of his body down and tell his joints they were bending. His body stayed as he put it.

He pressed wildly against the hull and his torso shot upward and refused to stop when upright. He fell forward.

He tried more slowly, balancing with both hands against the hull, until he squatted evenly. Then upward. Very slowly. Straight up. Arms out to balance.

He was straight now, aware of his nausea and lightheadedness.

He looked about. My God, where were the steam-tubes? He couldn't see them. They were black on black, nothing on nothing.

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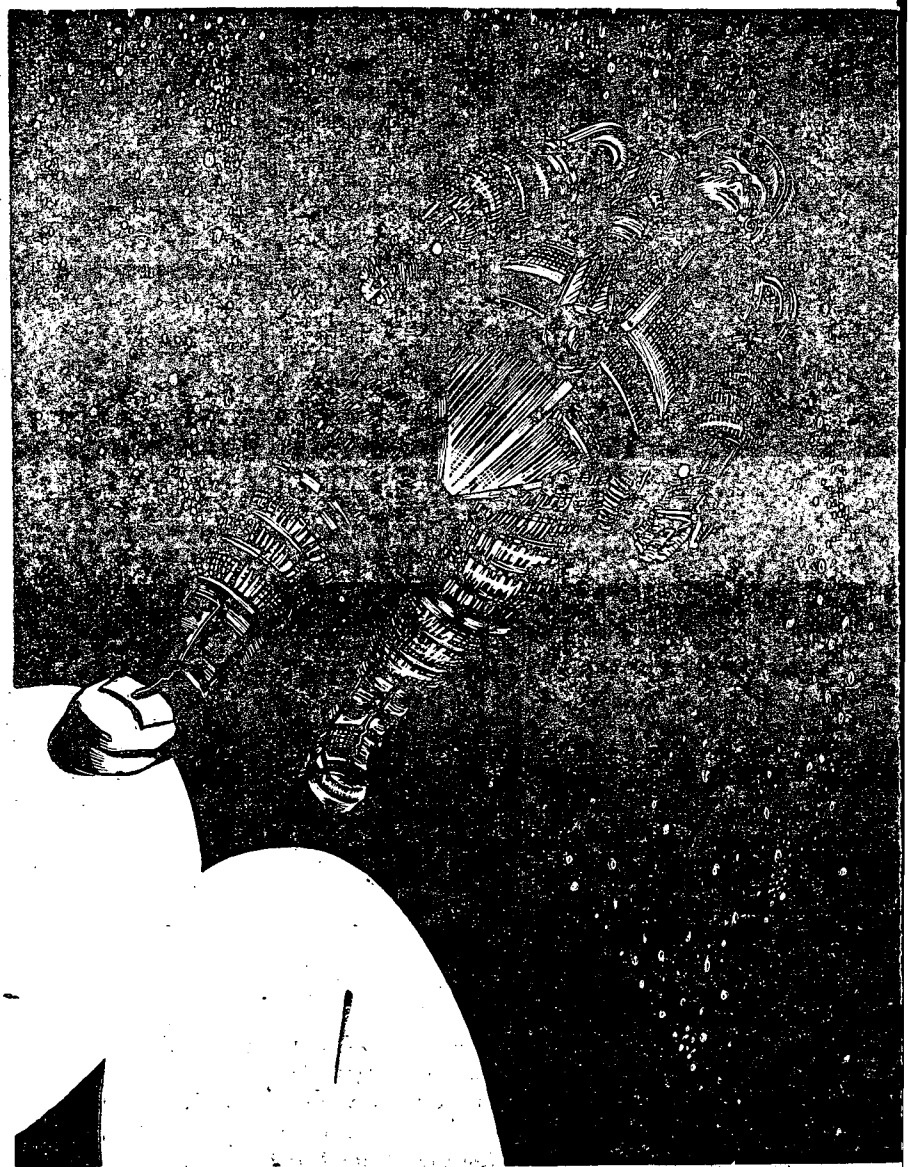

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Quickly, he turned on the wrist lamps. In space, there were no beams, only elliptical, sharply defined spots of blue steel, winking light back at him. Where they struck a rivet, a shadow was cast, knife-sharp and as black as space, the lighted region illuminated abruptly and without diffusion.

He moved his arms, his body swaying gently in the opposite direction; action and reaction. The vision of a steam-tube with its smooth cylindrical sides sprang at him.

He tried to move toward it. His foot held firmly to the hull. He pulled and it slogged upward, straining against quicksand that eased quickly. Three inches up and it had almost sucked free; six inches up and he thought it would fly away.

He advanced it and let it down, felt it enter the quicksand. When the sole was within two inches of the hull, it snapped down, out of control, hitting the hull ringingly. His spacesuit carried the vibrations, amplifying them in his ears.

He stopped in absolute terror. The dehydrators that dried the atmosphere within his suit could not handle the sudden gush of perspiration that drenched his forehead and armpits.

He waited, then tried lifting his foot again—a bare inch, holding it there by main force and moving it horizontally. Horizontal motion involved no effort at all; it was motion perpendicular to the lines of magnetic force. But he had to keep the foot from snapping down as he did so, and then lower it slowly.

He puffed with the effort. Each step was agony. The tendons of his knees were cracking, and there were knives in his side.

Mullen stopped to let the perspiration dry. It wouldn't do to steam up the inside of his faceplate. He flashed his wrist-lamps, and the steam-cylinder was right ahead.

The ship had four of them, at ninety degree intervals, thrusting out at an angle from the midgirdle. They were the "fine adjustment" of the ship's course. The coarse adjustment was the powerful thrusters back and front which fixed final velocity by their accelerative and decelerative force, and the hyperatomics that took care of the space-swallowing Jumps.

But occasionally the direction of flight had to be adjusted slightly and then the steam-cylinders took over. Singly, they could drive the ship up, down, right, left. By twos, in appropriate ratios of thrust, the ship could be turned in any desired direction.

The device had been unim-

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proved in centuries, being too simple to improve. The atomic pile heated the water content of a closed container into steam, driving it, in less than a second, up to temperatures where it would have broken down into a mixture of hydrogen and oxygen, and then into a mixture of electrons and ions. Perhaps the breakdown actually took place. No one ever bothered testing; it worked, so there was no need to.

At the critical point, a needle valve gave way and the steam thrust madly out in a short but incredible blast. And the ship, inevitably and majestically, moved in the opposite direction, veering about its own center of gravity. When the degrees of turn were sufficient, an equal and opposite blast would take place and the turning would be canceled. The ship would be moving at its original velocity, but in a new direction.

Mullen had dragged himself out to the lip of the steam-cylinder. He had a picture of himself—a small speck teetering at the extreme end of a structure thrusting out of an ovoid that was tearing through space at ten thousand miles an hour.

But there was no air-stream to whip him off the hull, and his magnetic soles held him more firmly than he liked.

With lights on, he bent down to peer into the tube and the ship dropped down precipitously as his orientation changed. He reached out to steady himself, but he was not falling. There was no up or down in space except for what his confused mind chose to consider up or down.

The cylinder was just large enough to hold a man, so that it might be entered for repair purposes. His light caught the rungs almost directly opposite his position at the lip. He puffed a sigh of relief with what breath he could muster. Some ships didn't have ladders.

He made his way to it, the ship appearing to slip and twist beneath him as he moved. He lifted an arm over the lip of the tube, feeling for the rung, loosened each foot, and drew himself within.

The knot in his stomach that had been there from the first was a convulsed agony now. If they should choose to manipulate the ship, if the steam should whistle out now—

He would never hear it; never know it. One instant he would be holding a rung, feeling slowly for the next with a groping arm. The next moment he would be alone in space, the ship a dark, dark nothingness lost forever among the stars. There would be, perhaps, a brief glory of swirling ice crystals drifting with him, shining in his wrist-light and slowly

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approaching and rotating about him, attracted by his mass like infinitesimal planets to an absurdly tiny Sun.

He was trickling sweat again, and now he was also conscious of thirst. He put it out of his mind. There would be no drinking until he was out of his suit—if ever.

Up a rung; up another; and another. How many were there? His hand slipped and he stared in disbelief at the glitter that showed under his light.

Ice?

Why not? The steam, incredibly hot as it was, would strike metal that was at nearly absolute zero. In the few split-seconds of thrust, there would not be time for the metal to warm above the freezing point of water. A sheet of ice would condense that would sublime slowly into the vacuum. It was the speed of all that happened that prevented the fusion of the tubes and of the original water-container itself.

His groping hand reached the end. Again the wrist-light. He stared with crawling horror at the steam nozzle, half an inch in diameter. It looked dead, harmless. But it always would, right up to the microsecond before—

Around it was the outer steam lock. It pivoted on a central hub that was springed on the portion toward space, screwed on the part toward the ship. The springs allowed it to give under the first wild thrust of steam pressure before the ship's mighty inertia could be overcome. The steam was bled into the inner chamber, breaking the force of the thrust, leaving the total energy unchanged, but spreading it over time so that the hull itself was in that much less danger of being staved in.

Mullen braced himself firmly against a rung and pressed against the outer lock so that it gave a little. It was stiff, but it didn't have to give much, just enough to catch on the screw. He felt it catch.

He strained against it and turned it, feeling his body twist in the opposite direction. It held tight, the screw taking up the strain as he carefully adjusted the small control switch that allowed the springs to fall free. How well he remembered the books he had read!

He was in the interlock space now, which was large enough to hold a man comfortably, again for convenience in repairs. He could no longer be blown away from the ship. If the steam blast were turned on now, it would merely drive him against the inner lock—hard enough to crush him to a pulp. A quick death he would never feel, at least.

Slowly, he unhooked his spare

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oxygen cylinder. There was only an inner lock between himself and the control room now. This lock opened outward into space so that the steam blast could only close it tighter, rather than blow it open. And it fitted tightly and smoothly. There was absolutely no way to open it from without.

He lifted himself above the lock, forcing his bent back against the curved inner surface of the interlock area. It made breathing difficult. The spare oxygen cylinder dangled at a queer angle. He held its metal-mesh hose and straightened it, forcing it against the inner lock so that vibration thudded. Again—again—

It would *have* to attract the attention of the Kloros. They would *have* to investigate.

He would have no way of telling when they were about to do so. Ordinarily, they would first let air into the interlock to force the outer lock shut. But now the outer lock was on the central screw, well away from its rim. Air would suck about it ineffectually, dragging out into space.

Mullen kept on thumping. Would the Kloros look at the air-gauge, note that it scarcely lifted from zero, or would they take its proper working for granted?

PORTER said, "He's been gone an hour and a half."

"I know," said Stuart.

They were all restless, jumpy, but the tension among themselves had disappeared. It was as though all the threads of emotion extended to the hull of the ship.

Porter was bothered. His philosophy of life had always been simple—take care of yourself because no one will take care of you for you. It upset him to see it shaken.

He said, "Do you suppose they've caught him?"

"If they had, we'd hear about it," replied Stuart, briefly.

Porter felt, with a miserable twinge, that there was little interest on the part of the others in speaking to him. He could understand it; he had not exactly earned their respect. For the moment, a torrent of self-excuse poured through his mind. The others had been frightened, too. A man had a right to be afraid. No one likes to die. At least, he hadn't broken like Aristides Polyorketes. He hadn't wept like Leblanc. He—

But there was Mullen, out there on the hull.

"Listen," he cried, "why did he do it?" They turned to look at him, not understanding, but Porter didn't care. It bothered him to the point where it had to come out. "I want to know why Mullen is risking his life."

"The man," said Windham, "is a patriot—"

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"No, none of that!" Porter was almost hysterical. "That little fellow has no emotions at all. He just has reasons and I want to know what those reasons are, because—"

He didn't finish the sentence. Could he say that if those reasons applied to a little middle-aged bookkeeper, they might apply even more forcibly to himself?

Polyorketes said, "He's one brave damn little fellow."

Porter got to his feet. "Listen," he said, "he may be stuck out there. Whatever he's doing, he may not be able to finish it alone. I—I volunteer to go out after him."

He was shaking as he said it and he waited in fear for the sarcastic lash of Stuart's tongue. Stuart was staring at him, probably with surprise, but Porter dared not meet his eyes to make certain.

Stuart said, mildly, "Let's give him another half-hour."

Porter looked up, startled. There was no sneer on Stuart's face. It was even friendly. They *all* looked friendly.

He said, "And then—"

"And then all those who do volunteer will draw straws or something equally democratic. Who volunteers, besides Porter?"

They all raised their hands; Stuart did, too.

But Porter was happy. He had volunteered first. He was anxious for the half-hour to pass.

IT caught Mullen by surprise. The outer lock flew open and the long, thin, snakelike, almost headless neck of a Kloro sucked out, unable to fight the blast of escaping air.

Mullen's cylinder flew away, almost tore free. After one wild moment of frozen panic, he fought for it, dragging it above the air-stream, waiting as long as he dared to let the first fury die down as the air of the control room thinned out, then bringing it down with force.

It caught the sinewy neck squarely, crushing it. Mullen, curled above the lock, almost entirely protected from the stream, raised the cylinder again and plunging it down again, striking the head, mashing the staring eyes to liquid ruin. In the near-vacuum, green blood was pumping out of what was left of the neck.

Mullen dared not vomit, but he wanted to.

With eyes averted, he backed away, caught the outer lock with one hand and imparted a whirl. For several seconds, it maintained that whirl. At the end of the screw, the springs engaged automatically and pulled it shut. What was left of the atmosphere tightened it and the laboring

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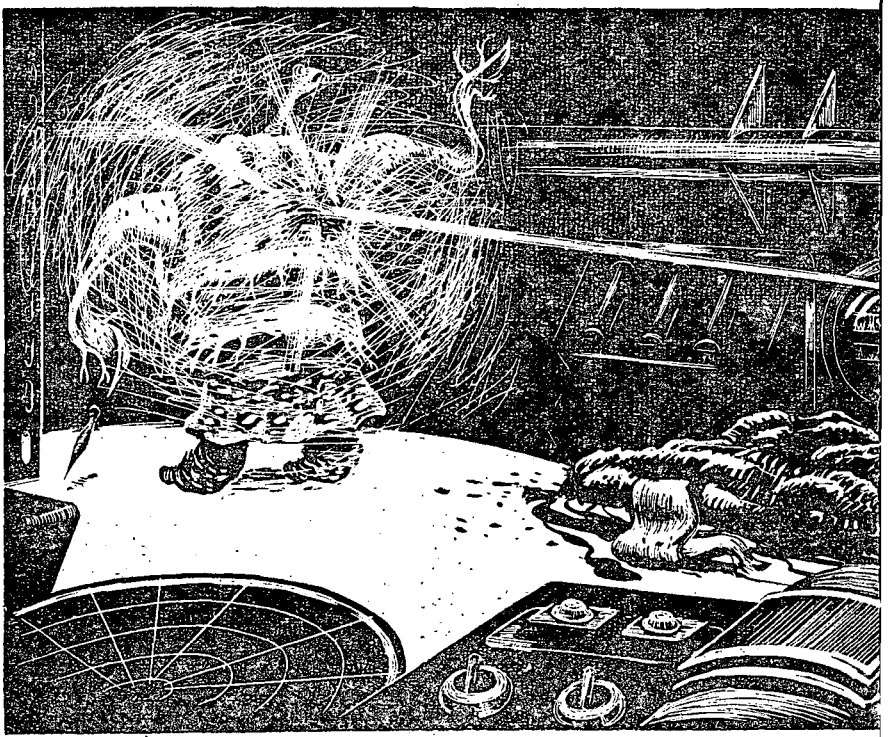

pumps could now begin to fill the control room once again.

Mullen crawled over the mangled Kloro and into the room. It was empty.

He had barely time to notice that when he found himself on his knees. He rose with difficulty. The transition from non-gravity to gravity had taken him entirely by surprise. It was Klorian gravity, too, which meant that with this suit, he carried a fifty percent overload for his small frame. At least, though, his heavy metal clogs no longer clung so exasperatingly to the metal underneath. Within the ship, floors and walls were of cork-covered aluminum alloy.

He circled slowly. The neckless Kloro had collapsed and lay with only an occasional twitch to show it had once been a living organism. He stepped over it, distastefully, and drew the steam-tube lock shut.

The room had a depressing bil-

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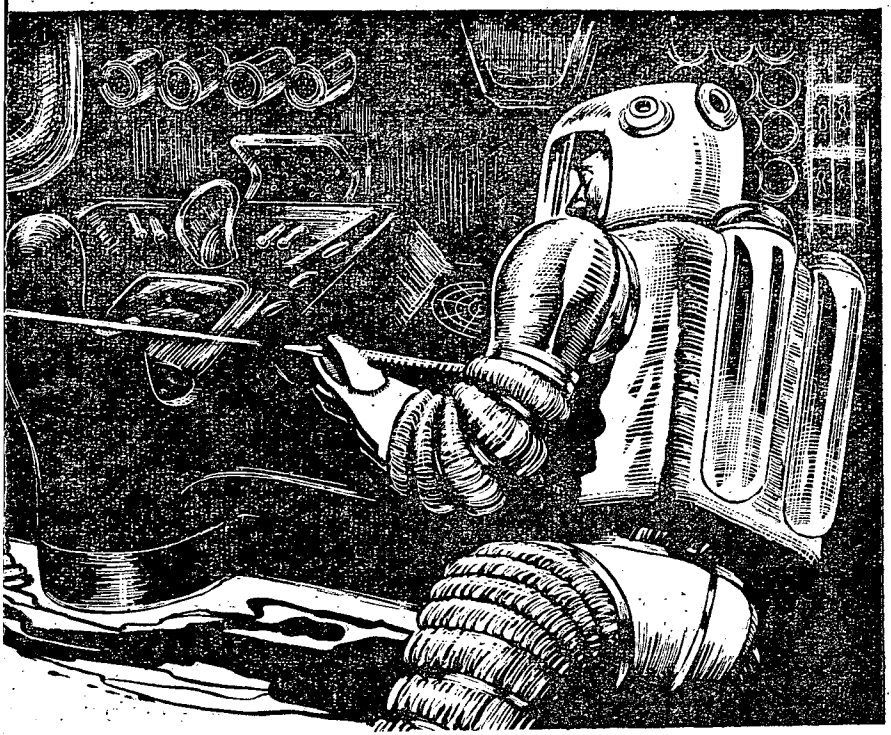

ious cast and the lights shone yellow-green. It was the Kloro atmosphere, of course.

Mullen felt a twinge of surprise and reluctant admiration. The Kloros obviously had some way of treating materials so that they were impervious to the oxidizing effect of chlorine. Even the map of Earth on the wall, printed on glossy plastic-backed paper, seemed fresh and untouched. He approached, drawn by the familiar outlines of the continents—

There was a flash of motion caught in the corner of his eyes. As quickly as he could in his heavy suit, he turned, then screamed. The Kloro he had thought dead was rising to its feet.

Its neck hung limp, an oozing mass of tissue mash, but its arms reached out blindly, and the tentacles about its chest vibrated rapidly like innumerable snakes' tongues.

It was blind, of course. The de-

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struction of its neck-stalk had deprived it of all sensory equipment, and partial asphyxiation had disorganized it. But the brain remained whole and safe in the abdomen. It still lived.

Mullen backed away. He circled, trying clumsily and unsuccessfully to tiptoe, though he knew that what was left of the Kloro was also deaf. It blundered on its way, struck a wall, felt to the base and began sidling along it.

Mullen cast about desperately for a weapon, found nothing. There was the Kloro's holster, but he dared not reach for it. Why hadn't he snatched it at the very first? Fool!

The door to the control room opened. It made almost no noise. Mullen turned, quivering.

The other Kloro entered, unharmed, entire. It stood in the doorway for a moment, chest-tendrils stiff and unmoving; its neck-stalk stretched forward; its horrible eyes flickering first at him and then at its nearly dead comrade.

And then its hand moved quickly to its side.

Mullen, without awareness, moved as quickly in pure reflex. He stretched out the hose of the spare oxygen-cylinder, which, since entering the control room, he had replaced in its suit-clamp, and cracked the valve. He didn't bother reducing the pressure. He let it gush out unchecked so that he nearly staggered under the backward push.

He could see the oxygen stream. It was a pale puff, billowing out amid the chlorine-green. It caught the Kloro with one hand on the weapon's holster.

The Kloro threw its hands up. The little beak on its head-nodule opened alarmingly, but noiselessly. It staggered and fell, writhed for a moment, then lay still. Mullen approached and played the oxygen-stream upon its body as though he were extinguishing a fire. And then he raised his heavy foot and brought it down upon the center of the neck-stalk and crushed it on the floor.

He turned to the first. It was sprawled, rigid.

The whole room was pale with oxygen, enough to kill whole legions of Kloros, and his cylinder was empty.

Mullen stepped over the dead Kloro, out of the control room and along the main corridor toward the prisoners' room.

Reaction had set in. He was whimpering in blind, incoherent fright.

STUART was tired. False hands and all, he was at the controls of a ship once again. Two light cruisers of Earth were on the way.

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For better than twenty-four hours he had handled the controls virtually alone. He had discarded the chlorinating equipment, rerigged the old atmospherics, located the ship's position in space, tried to plot a course, and sent out carefully guarded signals—which had worked.

So when the door of the control room opened, he was a little annoyed. He was too tired to play conversational handball. Then he turned, and it was Mullen stepping inside.

Stuart said, "For God's sake, get back into bed, Mullen!"

Mullen said, "I'm tired of sleeping, even though I never thought I would be a while ago."

"How do you feel?"

"I'm stiff all over. Especially my side." He grimaced and stared involuntarily around.

"Don't look for the Kloros," Stuart said. "We dumped the poor devils." He shook his head. "I was sorry for them. To themselves, *they're* the human beings, you know, and *we're* the aliens. Not that I'd rather they'd killed you, you understand."

"I understand."

Stuart turned a sidelong glance upon the little man who sat looking at the map of Earth and went on, "I owe you a particular and personal apology, Mullen. I didn't think much of you."

"It was your privilege," said Mullen in his dry voice. There was no feeling in it.

"No, it wasn't. It is no one's privilege to despise another. It is only a hard-won right after long experience."

"Have you been thinking about this?"

"Yes, all day. Maybe I can't explain. It's these hands." He held them up before him, spread out. "It was hard knowing that other people had hands of their own. I had to hate them for it. I always had to do my best to investigate and belittle their motives, point up their deficiencies, expose their stupidities. I had to do anything that would prove to myself that they weren't worth envying."

Mullen moved restlessly. "This explanation is not necessary."

"It is. It is!" Stuart felt his thoughts intently, strained to put them into words. "For years I've abandoned hope of finding any decency in human beings. Then you climbed into the C-chute."

"You had better understand," said Mullen, "that I was motivated by practical and selfish considerations. I will not have you present me to myself as a hero."

"I wasn't intending to. I know that you would do nothing without a reason. It was what your action did to the rest of us. It turned a collection of phonies and fools into decent people. And not by magic either. They were de-

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cent all along. It was just that they needed something to live up to and you supplied it. And—I'm one of them. I'll have to live up to you, too. For the rest of my life, probably."

Mullen turned away uncomfortably. His hand straightened his sleeves, which were not in the least twisted. His finger rested on the map.

He said, "I was born in Richmond, Virginia, you know. Here it is. I'll be going there first. Where were you born?"

"Toronto," said Stuart.

"That's right here. Not very far apart on the map, is it?"

Stuart said, "Would you tell me something?"

"If I can."

"Just why *did* you go out there?"

Mullen's precise mouth pursed. He said, dryly, "Wouldn't my rather prosaic reason ruin the inspirational effect?"

"Call it intellectual curiosity. Each of the rest of us had such obvious motives. Porter was scared to death of being interned; Leblanc wanted to get back to his sweetheart; Polyorketes wanted to kill Kloros; and Windham was a patriot according to his lights. As for me, I thought of myself as a noble idealist, I'm afraid. Yet in none of us was the motivation strong enough to get us into a spacesuit and out the C-chute. Then what made *you* do it, *you*, of all people?"

"Why the phrase, 'of all people'?"

"Don't be offended, but you seem devoid of all emotion."

"Do I?" Mullen's voice did not change. It remained precise and soft, yet somehow a tightness had entered it. "That's only training, Mr. Stuart, and self-discipline; not nature. A small man can have no respectable emotions. Is there anything more ridiculous than a man like myself in a state of rage? I'm five feet and one-half inch tall, and one hundred and two pounds in weight, if you care for exact figures. I insist on the half inch and the two pounds.

"Can I be dignified? Proud? Draw myself to my full height without inducing laughter? Where can I meet a woman who will not dismiss me instantly with a giggle? Naturally, I've had to learn to dispense with external display of emotion.

"*You* talk about deformities. No one would notice your hands or know they were different, if you weren't so eager to tell people all about it the instant you meet them. Do you think that the eight inches of height I do not have can be hidden? That it is not the first and, in most cases, the only thing about me that a person will notice?"

Stuart was ashamed. He had

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invaded a privacy he ought not have. He said, "I'm sorry."

"Why?"

"I should not have forced you to speak of this. I should have seen for myself that you—that you—"

"That I what? Tried to prove myself? Tried to show that while I might be small in body, I held within it a giant's heart?"

"I would not have put it mockingly."

"Why not? It's a foolish idea, and nothing like it is the reason I did what I did. What would I have accomplished if that's what was in my mind? Will they take me to Earth now and put me up before the television cameras—pitching them low, of course, to catch my face, or standing me on a chair—and pin medals on me?"

"They are quite likely to do exactly that."

"And what good would it do me? They would say, 'Gee, and he's such a little guy.' And afterward, what? Shall I tell each man I meet, 'You know, I'm the fellow they decorated for incredible valor last month?' How many medals, Mr. Stuart, do you suppose it would take to put eight inches and sixty pounds on me?"

Stuart said, "Put that way, I see your point."

Mullen was speaking a trifle more quickly now; a controlled heat had entered his words, warming them to just a tepid room temperature. "There *were* days when I thought I would show them, the mysterious 'them' that includes all the world. I was going to leave Earth and carve out worlds for myself. I would be a new and even smaller Napoleon. So I left Earth and went to Arcturus. And what could I do on Arcturus that I could not have done on Earth? Nothing. I balance books. So I am past the vanity, Mr. Stuart, of trying to stand on tiptoe."

"Then why *did* you do it?"

"I left Earth when I was twenty-eight and came to the Arcturian System. I've been there ever since. This trip was to be my first vacation, my first visit back to Earth in all that time. I was going to stay on Earth for six months. The Kloros instead captured us and would have kept us interned indefinitely. But I couldn't—I *couldn't* let them stop me from traveling to Earth. No matter what the risk, I had to prevent their interference. It wasn't love of woman, or fear, or hate, or idealism of any sort. It was stronger than any of those."

He stopped, and stretched out a hand as though to caress the map on the wall.

"Mr. Stuart," Mullen asked quietly, "haven't you ever been homesick?"

—ISAAC ASIMOV

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pleasant

Where better to prove for clues than in a criminal's dreams? But there are all sorts and shapes of dreams, including nightmares!

"YOUR wife is beautiful and a charming hostess and very interesting," the visitor bubbled.

"Isn't she?" Gniss said. "I married her only last year. I was especially taken with her dark hair. That's extremely rare, you know."

They walked into Gniss's most private office, and soft lights came on. The visitor gazed around, surprised.

"I see you are looking for the desk or table. Men of my rank don't use any," Gniss said.

There were not even chairs, only the couches affected in late years by fashionable people. Gniss dropped onto one, grunting,

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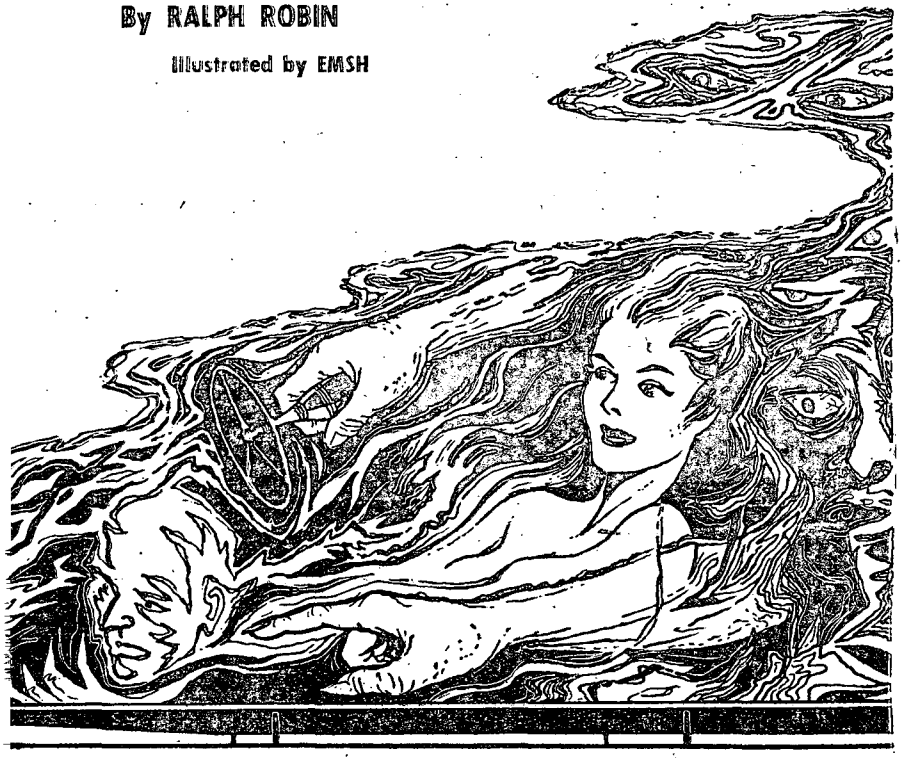
dreams

By RALPH ROBIN

Illustrated by EMSH



and waved the visitor to another.

"Do you know what this divan I'm lying on is covered with?" Gniss did not wait for an answer. "Cloth made from the cocoons of moth larvae by an incredibly ancient and expensive method."

The visitor shook his head in wonderment. The couch he was on was upholstered more modestly in plastic—of the very best quality, of course.

"It must be convenient to live right where you work," the visitor said.

They had just dined in Gniss's apartment, the official residence of the Chief Watcher. The apartment was a grand affair; since the time that Gniss had risen to

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Chief Watcher, it had spread through a whole floor of the immense building.

"My wife says I might not work at night so much if I lived farther away," Gniss pointed out.

"Is there much to do at night?" the visitor asked.

"I don't have my title for nothing! Even while they sleep, we watch them."

"You mean you put microphones under suspects' beds and listen to them talk in their sleep?" The visitor smiled to show that he was joking.

Gniss bellowed and shook, surprising the visitor, who thought the response was more than his feeble little joke deserved. But the good-natured laughter was something to remember, he noted for his mental scrapbook. At school, Gniss had been rather a dour boy.

"My dear fellow," Gniss said when he had control of his voice again, "they were doing that centuries before the first dispersal of man. Look at this!"

He shifted on his couch and began to play with a little jeweled wheel projecting from the wall. A section of the floor—at least a quarter of the large room—rose on slender pillars to make a platform. Under the platform, the purple floor appeared unchanged.

Gniss rolled his heavy body on one side and talked, it seemed to the visitor, to his pillow.

"Give me Blor," he said.

The visitor could see a faint haze eddy above the platform. Nothing else happened.

"Oh, well," said Gniss. "He rarely sleeps in his own bed—that's what makes him useful. But he's only a double spy."

The visitor's eyes were wide. *Only* a double spy!

"I'll show you something really big," Gniss said. He spoke gently to the pillow: "Give me Stak."

"Not—" the visitor blurted.

"Correct," Gniss said. "The famous rebel."

"But I thought—"

"That we couldn't catch up with him? That's what we let out for the public, and, naturally, for him. But we ran him down, and now we are watching him in a hundred different ways. If we arrested him, he would undoubtedly kill himself. That's something that even my watchers can't stop a determined man from doing. But before he dies, we want to find out who the traitor was that kept him informed of the government's plans during the critical time last year."

The visitor hadn't known, of course, that Stak had made use of an agent in official circles, but he was discreet enough to say nothing. It frightened him a little to hear such portentous matters,

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yet it flattered him, too, that his old school friend would be so open with him.

The haze above the platform deepened, and shone with internal light. The platform itself began to glow and to vibrate on its delicate pillars. Or perhaps it did not move; perhaps it was an illusion from the shimmering light.

The visitor did not know what to expect, but he felt a warm ripple of excitement. He glanced at Gniss. His host was watching the platform with an indefinable expression, in which there was at least some official — or was it fashionable?—weariness.

He has seen so much, the visitor thought, turning back to the platform.

Vaporous waves of light were rolling straight up, to dissipate; the visitor did not know where. The waves split and were less like waves and then were not waves at all. They were vague forms, gray and colored: some suggested people; some suggested things. Continually, they changed in shape and in size and in color.

"They are dreams!" the visitor exclaimed.

"Stak's dreams," Gniss said. "Now we are getting some continuity. Look."

"Where is Stak?"

"Oh, you rarely see the dreamer. You see through his eyes. That woman — the old woman with the young face; it's an odd angle, and the water and the steam and the bare arms—he must be dreaming he's a child and she's giving him a bath. It's unfortunate she didn't drown him."

The woman melted, faded, and a green billow was a wood and was separating into trees, and there was a kind of park. A lamb with a very intelligent face walked around a tree. Suddenly the lamb opened its mouth and cried like a human baby.

The visitor was startled. It was the first sound from the dream projection.

"You mean you can hear the dreams too?" he asked naively.

"Of course, my friend. Our technical people are talented."

"I should say! Tell me, how is it all done?"

"Well, we were working along at a telepathic instrument, which isn't quite perfected yet. Thoughts, you know, are produced by electrical impulses in the brain and these induce weak electromagnetic fields. Our theory was to build up the patterns of visual and auditory thoughts from the electromagnetic fields. For some reason the instrument hasn't worked right as a general device, but we found out by accident that it worked perfectly for dreams. Dreams are a form of thought, but there is a subtle

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difference in the fields."

"Marvelous!" exclaimed the visitor. He had not noticed the metamorphosis of the technical people into "we."

Wait till I tell my children, the visitor thought. But maybe he had better not say anything at all about his call on Gniss. He smiled as he remembered how his children had tried to talk him out of visiting his old schoolmate.

"Visit the museums," they had told him. "The art galleries. Go inside that big statue of Kumat. See the insect zoo—it's a wonderful place and very educational." The youngsters had been to the capital twice, their father never, and they were very knowing. "There's plenty to do without looking for trouble," his boy Trenr had insisted.

"But Gniss and I were great friends at school, and I'm a respectable citizen. Why should Gniss cause me trouble?" he had asked, puzzled.

Images came into being on the stage, and vanished, in a bizarre panorama. Uniformed watchers, already taller than a dream roof, grew still taller until their heads were lost in the real ceiling. Their monstrous hands held hoop-shaped mind-rippers. A terrified voice cried, "No—no—no—" over and over. The word filled the room.

The visitor felt a surge of pity for the trapped outlaw, lost now in the nightmare of fear. Yet he said scornfully, as much to himself as to Gniss, "He's a coward after all, isn't he?"

"Everyone's a coward," Gniss replied. "But, awake, Stak is less a coward than most."

The nightmare dissolved into confused patterns; the terrified voice dropped to a thin, wordless babble. The dream projection focused to a sort of cellar. Twenty or thirty men and women were sitting on the floor. Their faces were turned toward Gniss and the visitor.

"He's dreaming about a meeting, and I think he's making a speech," Gniss said. "This is likely to be useful. Naturally it's being watched in the regular monitoring chambers. Our monitors will try to identify everybody at the meeting. There are difficulties. Sometimes several faces are blended into one in a dream.

"Look at those expressions! The sentimental fool thinks all his followers are noble souls. See that skinny fellow to the left? He positively drips nobility of soul. And that woman over there? She belongs in heaven. And will get there soon, no doubt," Gniss added with a laugh.

The visitor found himself saying, "But dreams are all pretty much mixed up. Isn't it possible he might put a chance acquain-

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tance at one of those dream meetings? Or someone he saw on the street? Couldn't it happen to anybody?"

"We try to be as fair as we can. But you know the old saying: 'It is far better that ten innocent men be punished than that one guilty man go free.' "

"That's very true," the visitor said earnestly, "and everyone must be assumed to be guilty until he can prove his innocence."

Gniss motioned for him to be quiet. Stak's muttering voice was gaining strength. It sounded more like language, and soon the visitor could pick out words.

" . . . choose . . . happy and free . . . man's will . . . life . . . sacrifice . . . era . . . Gniss . . ."

The word was unmistakable.

Gniss roared his laughter. "I'm even in their dreams. But I suppose this must be boring you. Shall I turn it off? I can always have it repeated by the recording system, if I need to see it later." His hand was at the little jeweled wheel.

"I'm enjoying it," the visitor protested.

"Would you rather take a walk through some of the installations? We work around the clock, you know. We could look in at the classification laboratory where we catalogue everybody by the positions of the atoms in their chromosomes. Give the technician a piece of your fingernail or a bit of hair or a scraping of skin —anything that contains at least one whole cell—and in five minutes he'll tell you your name. Or we could visit the mind-ripper range where we train recruits."

"I'd rather not see that," the visitor said. In the back of his mind was a rumor about the mind-ripper range that he had tried-not to listen to.

"The targets for today didn't prove their innocence," Gniss explained drily. His hand was still at the wheel. "Well?"

"Let's watch it a little more," the visitor said. "It's changing to something new."

"H'mm, so it is. This looks interesting."

It was the park where the lamb had walked around the tree and cried. But there was no lamb: there was a young woman, walking, alone. She was wearing a long cloak of a kind out of fashion for several years, but, the visitor thought, more becoming than the short cloaks the women were wearing now. Her yellow hair was loosely tied with a filmy scarf. Her face was more beautiful than any real face the visitor had ever seen.

It was a face of delicate symmetry; of early love; of high intelligence.

Gniss raised himself and leaned on his elbow. "We know that Stak

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hasn't had a woman for some time, at least since we closed in. Watch, she'll be taking that cloak off pretty soon—and the rest of her clothes, too, no doubt. That's usual in dreams."

The visitor was shocked, but he tried to keep from showing it. "Be as good as the nakeds I used to go to when I was a young fellow," he said bravely.

As a matter of fact, he had always gone only to the half-nakeds and had taken his wife Naid, both before they were married and afterwards. People had laughed at their being together so much, but they had had a fine life together. Then Naid had died while the children were still small. He wondered whether he ever dreamed of Naid. He never could remember his own dreams, probably because he generally jumped out of bed so quickly and went about the day's business.

On the dream stage, the image of a man was standing beside the girl. The man was young and was wearing the kind of clothes that students wore, and he was holding the girl's hand.

"It's Stak," Gniss said. "This is the less common kind of dream, though usual enough, where the dreamer seems to be watching himself from the outside. We get a full view of him then and we see his actions. It's the kind of dream that's clearest and gives us the best information. I recognize the girl now—Lell. She used to be Stak's sweetheart." He said the word contemptuously. "She was executed when he was first joining the revolt."

The dream couple embraced in pantomime. The scene was very real, and it was hard for the visitor to remember that these were only images from a dreaming brain. His knowledge that the girl was dead added a strange quality to the scene.

While he was thinking that this bright girl had been given to the sacred death birds—if indeed her body had been treated with such respect — Stak cried out: "It's you, Lell! But you're dead!"

Lell answered, "I've come back, darling. I've come back for your sake."

Now she did unfasten her cloak. Gniss chuckled and the visitor tried to chuckle as Stak was helping her to take off her clothes with frantic hands. But in a moment she was dressed again and beyond his reach.

"I'm dead, I'm dead, I'm dead," she was saying, and then she was not Lell at all, but another woman. The cloak she was wearing was short and her head was bare in the new style—and her hair was dark.

Gniss made a noise that could have been a breath, but sounded more like a growl or a cry.

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It was a noise that made sweat extrude from the visitor's forehead, made his throat tighten as if he would never swallow again. He saw himself in the great statue of Kumat with other middle-aged tourists. He saw himself watching the fishes in the Luminous Pond. He saw himself at his desk in the criteria room, where he had worked for thirty years.

He saw the sacred death birds circle and lower.

The visitor made an effort to collect himself. He must decide whether it was better to speak or to be silent, to go on looking or to turn away. He did not know. The man on the couch of cocoon cloth was no longer his old schoolfellow; he was the Chief Watcher.

On the stage, the dark dream woman moved closer to Stak. "I love you too, Stak. I am not Lell. Lell is dead. I am Orv. But I love you, too."

Stak said, "To love me is to die. Even to know me is to die."

"What difference does that make? We are all going to die some day. Why not die to bring a time when others can be free? Happy and free—unhappy and free—*free!*"

"My wife," Gniss said, in a terrible voice. "My wife Orv."

Now it was in the open, and the visitor knew he had to speak. He turned to Gniss. "It's a trick, of course. He got hold of a picture somehow. He knows his dreams are being watched, and rebels must have found some way of controlling their dreams. It can be done, you know. You consciously pick a subject or a person—"

"Be quiet," the Chief Watcher said, and the visitor regretted that he had spoken.

Gniss never took his eyes from the dream projection, but the visitor would not look. Already, he had seen too much.

He could not help hearing, though. Dream-Stak and dream-Orv spoke lovingly, eagerly. Their words grew more intense, were blurred, became rhythmic sobs.

Then there was silence. The visitor looked again. The images were gone. The lifeless platform was sinking into the floor.

Gniss said in a cold, faraway voice, "I will have to dispose of them. And of you, I am afraid. You may have heard the proverb of the North Tribes: 'Who sees what the gods want hidden had better been born blind.' I was at fault in bothering, childishly enough, to impress an old friend—but I have got where I am by making sure that other people expiate my faults."

"Surely, Gniss, you don't believe it. You must realize it's a trick." The visitor's voice was

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shrill with fear.

"It's not a trick. There were several reports, ambiguously phrased. I would not understand them; or, if I understood them, I would not believe them."

The visitor thought again of his children's advice. If only he had listened to them! He pictured them in his mind: his son, nineteen-year-old Trenr; his daughter, sixteen-year-old Zhom. They were so wise, yet so foolish in many ways, and so young. Knowing he would have to return to them, he grew calm.

He rose from the couch and, speaking slowly and steadily, said to the Chief Watcher: "You told me yourself that Stak's dreams were shown in the regular monitoring chambers, that they were recorded. And there are the reports you mention. How can this thing be kept secret? A hundred people must know about it besides me. A hundred and one can't make it any worse.

"Do you really think that by killing me you can stop the story from reaching high men in the Government? I am only an ordinary citizen, but even I have heard of the rivalry among you powerful men.

"Gniss, you are destroyed. Destroying me won't save you. Nothing can save you. You may as well let me go home."

Gniss reacted in an astonishing way. He let loose his bellowing laugh.

"You have led too obscure a life," he said, choking. "You could have made a career for yourself here. You have just achieved something that calls for unusual talent — you've won a point simply by stating the obvious truth. I was only fooling myself, I see now. As you say, I am destroyed. I'll kill myself, of course."

Gniss put his hand to the jeweled wheel. The red and blue and green gems twinkled between his fat fingers.

"Go out that way," Gniss said, and the visitor turned and saw that the wall had opened to a small elevator. "It will take you to an unguarded door."

"Good-by," said the visitor. "An old friend's good-by. I know I will never see you again."

"Never," Gniss said gravely. "Good-by, old schoolfellow."

There were tears in the visitor's eyes as he walked into the elevator. As soon as he had entered, the door automatically closed, and the elevator automatically carried him to a lower floor, where it automatically and completely disposed of him.

Nothing was left for the sacred death birds.

"Little people, little minds," Gniss said. "As if killing oneself were all a man could do."

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Then he spoke to his pillow quietly, giving orders for a hundred deaths. His wife's, first; then Stak's; then . . .

When he was through the list, he reconsidered and made it two hundred.

The hour was late and Gniss was tired when his mistress greeted him in her house, in an old quarter of the city.

They embraced.

"Dear girl, dear Jenj," Gniss said. "I have had to work late. It's been a difficult day and I'm exhausted."

"Poor darling," said Jenj. "Lie down right now and rest."

Gniss stretched out on a couch, grunting comfortably. The plastic felt a bit chilly, and he thought, *I'll have to find her some of that primitive larval stuff.*

A young man and a young woman walked in from another room. They were carrying small mind-rippers.

"Get out of the way," the man said to Jenj.

Jenj moved quickly.

Gniss jumped to his feet. He started to say something, but the full force of two mind-rippers stopped him. His body fell back on the couch.

Jenj began to cry.

"What's the matter, Jenj?" the man said. "Think of Stak. Think of Orv. I have never taken part in an execution that I regret less."

"You're not a woman," Jenj said, still crying. "After all, a woman can't simulate for so long without developing some emotional attachment, even for a monster like that."

But she made an effort to be stern.

"Who is going to take Stak's place?" she asked, as if nothing now remained to be said about Gniss.

The man answered, "It's not definite yet. Maybe Trenr. He's young, but Stak thought highly of him. He's very capable."

"And close-mouthed," the woman said. "Even his father, poor innocent, never knew Trenr was one of us. He was paying Gniss a social call. Imagine!"

—RALPH ROBIN

Don't Miss the Smashing Conclusion of . . .

THE PUPPET MASTERS

By ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

. . . in next month's issue! With Heinlein plotting like a superb chess player and writing with the voltage of a cyclotron . . . don't bet that you can guess the climax! You'll lose your bet!

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AMBITION

By WILLIAM L. BADE

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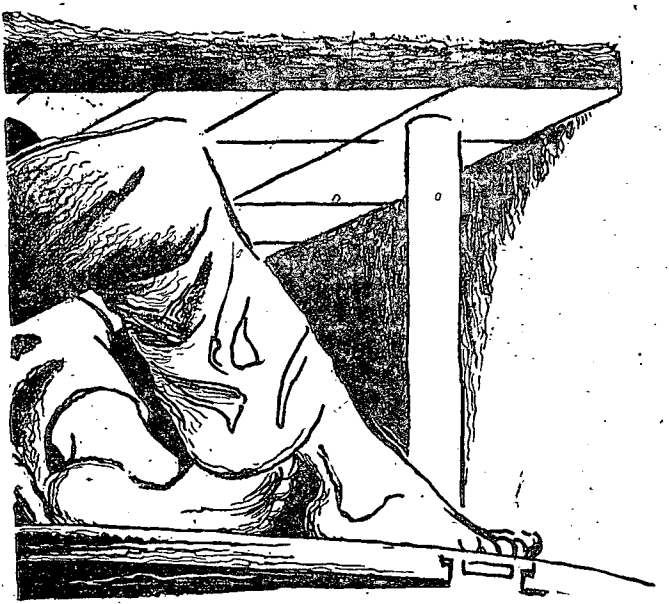
To the men of the future, the scientific goals of today were as incomprehensible as the ancient quest for the Holy Grail!

THERE was a thump. Maitland stirred, came half awake, and opened his eyes. The room was dark except where a broad shaft of moonlight from the open window fell on the foot of his bed, Outside, the residential section of the Reservation slept silently under the pale illumination of the full Moon. He guessed sleepily that it was about three o'clock.

What had he heard? He had a definite impression that the sound had come from within the room. It had sounded like someone stumbling into a chair, or—

Something moved in the darkness on the other side of the room. Maitland started to sit up and it was as though a thousand volts had shorted his brain . . .



Illustrated by L. WOROMAY

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This time, he awoke more normally. He opened his eyes, looked through the window at a section of azure sky, listened to the singing of birds somewhere outside. A beautiful day. In the middle of the process of stretching his rested muscles, arms extended back, legs tensed, he froze, looking up—for the first time really seeing the ceiling. He turned his head, then rolled off the bed, wide awake.

This wasn't his room!

The lawn outside wasn't part of the Reservation! Where the labs and the shops should have been, there was deep prairie grass, then a green ocean pushed into waves by the breeze stretching to the horizon. This wasn't the California desert! Down the hill, where the liquid oxygen plant ought to have been, a river wound across the scene, almost hidden beneath its leafy roof of huge ancient trees.

Shock contracted Maitland's diaphragm and spread through his body. His breathing quickened. *Now* he remembered what had happened during the night, the sound in the darkness, the dimly seen figure, and then—what? Blackout . . .

Where was he? Who had brought him here? For what purpose?

He thought he knew the answer to the last of those questions. As a member of the original atomic reaction-motor team, he possessed information that other military powers would very much like to obtain. It was absolutely incredible that anyone had managed to abduct him from the heavily guarded confines of the Reservation, yet someone had done it. How?

HE pivoted to inspect the room. Even before his eyes could take in the details, he had the impression that there was something wrong about it. To begin with, the style was unfamiliar. There were no straight lines or sharp corners anywhere. The walls were paneled in featureless blue plastic and the doors were smooth surfaces of metal, half ellipses, without knobs. The flowing lines of the chair and table, built apparently from an aluminum alloy, somehow gave the impression of arrested motion. Even after allowances were made for the outlandish design, something about the room still was not right.

His eyes returned to the doors, and he moved over to study the nearer one. As he had noticed, there was no knob, but at the right of this one, at about waist level, a push-button projected out of the wall. He pressed it; the door slid aside and disappeared. Maitland glanced in at the dis-

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closed bathroom, then went over to look at the other door.

There was no button beside this one, nor any other visible means of causing it to open.

Baffled, he turned again and looked at the large open window—and realized what it was that had made the room seem so queer.

It did not look like a jail cell. There were no bars . . .

Striding across the room, he lunged forward to peer out and violently banged his forehead. He staggered back, grimacing with pain, then reached forward cautious fingers and discovered a hard sheet of stuff so transparent that he had not even suspected its presence. Not glass! Glass was never this clear or strong. A plastic, no doubt, but one he hadn't heard of. Security sometimes had disadvantages.

He looked out at the peaceful vista of river and prairie. The character of the sunlight seemed to indicate that it was afternoon. He became aware that he was hungry.

Where the devil could this place be? And—muscles tightened about his empty stomach—what was in store for him here?

He stood trembling, acutely conscious that he was afraid and helpless, until a flicker of motion at the bottom of the hill near the river drew his attention. Pressing his nose against the window, he strained his eyes to see what it was.

A man and a woman were coming toward him up the hill. Evidently they had been swimming, for each had a towel; the man's was hung around his neck, and the woman was still drying her bobbed black hair.

Maitland speculated on the possibility that this might be Sweden; he didn't know of any other country where public bathing at this time of year was customary. However, that prairie certainly didn't look Scandinavian . . .

As they came closer, he saw that both of them had dark uniform suntans and showed striking muscular development, like persons who had trained for years with weights. They vanished below his field of view, presumably into the building.

He sat down on the edge of the cot and glared helplessly at the floor.

ABOUT half an hour later, the door he couldn't open slid aside into the wall. The man Maitland had seen outside, now clad in gray trunks and sandals, stood across the threshold looking in at him. Maitland stood up and stared back, conscious suddenly that in his rumpled pajamas he made an unimpressive figure.

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The fellow looked about forty-five. The first details Maitland noticed were the forehead, which was quite broad, and the calm, clear eyes. The dark hair, white at the temples, was combed back, still damp from swimming. Below, there was a wide mouth and a firm, rounded chin.

This man was intelligent, Maitland decided, and extremely sure of himself.

Somehow, the face didn't go with the rest of him. The man had the head of a thinker, the body of a trained athlete—an unusual combination.

Impassively, the man said, "My name is Swarts. You want to know where you are. I am not going to tell you." He had an accent, European, but otherwise unidentifiable. Possibly German. Maitland opened his mouth to protest, but Swarts went on, "However, you're free to do all the guessing you want." Still there was no suggestion of a smile.

"Now, these are the rules. You'll be here for about a week. You'll have three meals a day, served in this room. You will not be allowed to leave it except when accompanied by myself. You will not be harmed in any way, provided you cooperate. And you can forget the silly idea that we want your childish secrets about rocket motors." Maitland's heart jumped. "My reason for bringing you here is altogether different. I want to give you some psychological tests . . ."

"Are you crazy?" Maitland asked quietly. "Do you realize that at this moment one of the greatest hunts in history must be going on? I'll admit I'm baffled as to where we are and how you got me here—but it seems to me that you could have found someone less conspicuous to give your tests to."

Briefly, then, Swarts did smile. "They won't find you," he said. "Now, come with me."

AFTER that outlandish cell, Swarts' laboratory looked rather commonplace. There was something like a surgical cot in the center, and a bench along one wall supported several electronics cabinets. A couple of them had cathode ray tube screens, and they all presented a normal complement of meters, pilot lights, and switches. Cables from them ran across the ceiling and came to a focus above the high flat cot in the center of the room.

"Lie down," Swarts said. When Maitland hesitated, Swarts added, "Understand one thing—the more you cooperate, the easier things will be for you. If necessary, I will use coercion. I can get all my results against your will, if I must. I would prefer

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not to. Please don't make me."

"What's the idea?" Maitland asked. "What is all this?"

Swarts hesitated, though not, Maitland astonishedly felt, to evade an answer, but to find the proper words. "You can think of it as a lie detector. These instruments will record your reactions to the tests I give you. That is as much as you need to know. Now lie down."

Maitland stood there for a moment, deliberately relaxing his tensed muscles. "Make me."

If Swarts was irritated, he didn't show it. "That was the first test," he said. "Let me put it another way. I would appreciate it a lot if you'd lie down on this cot. I would like to test my apparatus."

Maitland shook his head stubbornly.

"I see," Swarts said. "You want to find out what you're up against."

He moved so fast that Maitland couldn't block the blow. It was to the solar plexus, just hard enough to double him up, fighting for breath. He felt an arm under his back, another behind his knees. Then he was on the cot. When he was able to breath again, there were straps across his chest, hips, knees, ankles, and arms, and Swarts was tightening a clamp that held his head immovable.

Presently, a number of tiny electrodes were adhering to his temples and to other portions of his body, and a minute microphone was clinging to the skin over his heart. These devices terminated in cables that hung from the ceiling. A sphygmomanometer sleeve was wrapped tightly around his left upper arm, its rubber tube trailing to a small black box clamped to the frame of the cot. Another cable left the box and joined the others.

So—Maitland thought—Swarts could record changes in his skin potential, heartbeat, and blood pressure: the involuntary responses of the body to stimuli.

The question was, what were the stimuli to be?

"Your name," said Swarts, "is Robert Lee Maitland. You are thirty-four years old. You are an engineer, specialty heat transfer, particularly as applied to rocket motors . . . No, Mr. Maitland, I'm not going to question you about your work; just forget about it. Your home town is Madison, Wisconsin . . ."

"You seem to know everything about me," Maitland said defiantly, looking up into the hanging forest of cabling. "Why this recital?"

"I do not know everything about you—yet. And I'm testing the equipment, calibrating it to your reactions." He went on,

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"Your favorite recreations are chess and reading what you term science fiction. Maitland, *how would you like to go to the Moon?*"

Something eager leaped in Maitland's breast at the abrupt question, and he tried to turn his head. Then he forced himself to relax. "What do you mean?"

Swarts was chuckling. "I really hit a semantic push-button there, didn't I? Maitland, I brought you here because you're a man who wants to go to the Moon. I'm interested in finding out *why*."

IN THE evening a girl brought Maitland his meal. As the door slid aside, he automatically stood up, and they stared at each other for several seconds.

She had the high cheekbones and almond eyes of an Oriental, skin that glowed like gold in the evening light, yet thick coiled braids of blonde hair that glittered like polished brass. Shorts and a sleeveless blouse of some thick, reddish, metallic-looking fabric clung to her body, and over that she was wearing a light, ankle-length cloak of what seemed to be white wool.

She was looking at him with palpable curiosity and something like expectancy. Maitland sighed and said, "Hello," then glanced down self-consciously at his wrinkled green pajamas.

She smiled, put the tray of food on the table, and swept out, her cloak billowing behind her. Maitland remained standing, staring at the closed door for a minute after she was gone.

Later, when he had finished the steak and corn on the cob and shredded carrots, and a feeling of warm well-being was diffusing from his stomach to his extremities, he sat down on the bed to watch the sunset and to think.

There were three questions for which he required answers before he could formulate any plan or policy.

Where was he?

Who was Swarts?

What was the purpose of the "tests" he was being given?

It was possible, of course, that this was all an elaborate scheme for getting military secrets, despite Swarts' protestations to the contrary. Maitland frowned. This place certainly didn't have the appearance of a military establishment, and so far there had been nothing to suggest the kind of interrogation to be expected from foreign intelligence officers.

It might be better to tackle the first question first. He looked at the Sun, a red spheroid already half below the horizon, and tried to think of a region that had this kind of terrain. That prairie out there was unique. Almost anywhere in the world, land like that

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would be cultivated, not allowed to go to grass.

This might be somewhere in Africa . . .

He shook his head, puzzled. The Sun disappeared and its blood-hued glow began to fade from the sky. Maitland sat there, trying to get hold of the problem from an angle where it wouldn't just slip away. After a while the western sky became a screen of clear luminous blue, a backdrop for a pure white brilliant star. As always at that sight, Maitland felt his worry drain away, leaving an almost mystical sense of peace and an undefinable longing.

Venus, the most beautiful of the planets.

Maitland kept track of them all in their majestic paths through the constellations, but Venus was his favorite. Time and time again he had watched its steady climb higher and higher in the western sky, its transient rule there as evening star, its progression toward the horizon, and loved it equally in its *alter ego* of morning star. Venus was an old friend. An old friend . . .

Something icy settled on the back of his neck, ran down his spine, and diffused into his body. He stared at the planet unbelievingly, fists clenched, forgetting to breathe.

Last night Venus hadn't been there.

Venus was a morning star just now . . .

Just now!

He realized the truth in that moment.

LATER, when that jewel of a planet had set and the stars were out, he lay on the bed, still warm with excitement and relief. He didn't have to worry any more about military secrets, or who Swarts was. Those questions were irrelevant now. And now he could accept the psychological tests at their face value; most likely, they were what they purported to be.

Only one question of importance remained:

What year was this?

He grimaced in the darkness, an involuntary muscular expression of jubilation and excitement. The *future!* Here was the opportunity for the greatest adventure imaginable to 20th Century man.

Somewhere, out there under the stars, there must be grand glittering cities and busy spaceports, roaring gateways to the planets. Somewhere, out there in the night, there must be men who had walked beside the Martian canals and pierced the shining cloud mantle of Venus—somewhere, perhaps, men who had visited the distant luring stars and returned. Surely, a civilization that had developed time travel could reach the stars!

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And *he* had a chance to become a part of all that! He could spend his life among the planets, a citizen of deep space, a voyager of the challenging spaceways between the solar worlds.

"I'm adaptable," he told himself gleefully. "I can learn fast. There'll be a job for me out there . . ."

If—

Suddenly sobered, he rolled over and put his feet on the floor, sat in the darkness thinking. Tomorrow. Tomorrow he would have to find a way of breaking down Swarts' reticence. He would have to make the man realize that secrecy wasn't necessary in this case. And if Swarts still wouldn't talk, he would have to find a way of forcing the issue. The fellow had said that he didn't need cooperation to get his results, but—

After a while Maitland smiled to himself and went back to bed.

HE WOKE in the morning with someone gently shaking his shoulder. He rolled over and looked up at the girl who had brought him his meal the evening before. There was a tray on the table and he sniffed the smell of bacon. The girl smiled at him. She was dressed as before, except that she had discarded the white cloak.

As he swung his legs to the floor, she started toward the door, carrying the tray with the dirty dishes from yesterday. He stopped her with the word, "Miss!"

She turned, and he thought there was something eager in her face.

"Miss, do you speak my language?"

"Yes," hesitantly. She lingered too long on the hiss of the last consonant.

"Miss," he asked, watching her face intently, "what year is this?"

Startlingly, she laughed, a mellow peal of mirth that had nothing forced about it. She turned toward the door again and said over her shoulder, "You will have to ask Swarts about that. I cannot tell you."

"Wait! You mean you don't know?"

She shook her head. "I cannot tell you."

"All right; we'll let it go at that."

She grinned at him again as the door slid shut.

SWARTS came half an hour later, and Maitland began his planned offensive.

"What year is this?"

Swarts' steely eyes locked with his. "You know what the date is," he stated.

"No, I don't. Not since yesterday."

"Come on," Swarts said pa-

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tiently, "let's get going. We have a lot to get through this morning."

"I *know* this isn't 1950. It's probably not even the 20th Century. Venus was a morning star before you brought me here. Now it's an evening star."

"Never mind that. Come."

Wordlessly, Maitland climbed to his feet, preceded Swarts to the laboratory, lay down and allowed him to fasten the straps and attach the instruments, making no resistance at all. When Swarts started saying a list of words — doubtlessly some sort of semantic reaction test—Maitland began the job of integrating "$\csc^3 x\ dx$" in his head. It was a calculation which required great concentration and frequent tracing back of steps. After several minutes, he noticed that Swarts had stopped calling words. He opened his eyes to find the other man standing over him, looking somewhat exasperated and a little baffled.

"What year is this?" Maitland asked in a conversational tone.

"We'll try another series of tests."

It took Swarts nearly twenty minutes to set up the new apparatus. He lowered a bulky affair with two cylindrical tubes like the twin stacks of a binocular microscope over Maitland's head, so that the lenses at the ends of the tubes were about half an inch from the engineer's eyes. He attached tiny clamps to Maitland's eyelashes.

"These will keep you from holding your eyes shut," he said. "You can blink, but the springs are too strong for you to hold your eyelids down against the tension."

He inserted button earphones into Maitland's ears—

And then the show began.

He was looking at a door in a partly darkened room, and there were footsteps outside, a peremptory knocking. The door flew open, and outlined against the light of the hall, he saw a man with a twelve-gauge shotgun. The man shouted, "Now I've got you, you wife-stealer!" He swung the shotgun around and pulled the trigger. There was a terrible blast of sound and the flash of smokeless powder—then blackness.

With a deliberate effort, Maitland unclenched his fists and tried to slow his breathing. Some kind of emotional reaction test—what was the *countermove*? He closed his eyes, but shortly the muscles around them declared excruciatingly that they couldn't keep that up.

Now he was looking at a girl. She . . .

Maitland gritted his teeth and fought to use his brain; then he had it.

He thought of a fat slob of a

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bully who had beaten him up one day after school. He remembered a talk he had heard by a politician, who had all the intelligent social responsibility of a rogue gorilla, but no more. He brooded over the damnable stupidity and short-sightedness of Swarts in standing by his silly rules and not telling him about this new world.

Within a minute, he was in an ungovernable rage. His muscles tightened against the restraining straps. He panted, sweat came out on his forehead, and he began to curse. Swarts! How he hated . . .

The scene was suddenly a flock of sheep spread over a green hillside. There was blood hammering in Maitland's temples. His face felt hot and swollen and he writhed against the restraint of the straps.

The scene disappeared, the lenses of the projector retreated from his eyes and Swarts was standing over him, white-lipped. Maitland swore at him for a few seconds, then relaxed and smiled weakly. His head was starting to ache from the effort of blinking.

"What year is this?" he asked.

"All right," Swarts said. "A.D. 2634."

Maitland's smile became a grin.

"I REALLY haven't the time to waste talking irrelevancies," Swarts said a while later. "Hon-

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estly, Maitland, I'm working against a time limit. If you'll cooperate, I'll tell Ching to answer your questions."

"Ching?"

"Ingrid Ching is the girl who has been bringing you your meals."

Maitland considered a moment, then nodded. Swarts lowered the projector to his eyes again, and this time the engineer did not resist.

That evening, he could hardly wait for her to come. Too excited to sit and watch the sunset, he paced interminably about the room, sometimes whistling nervously, snapping his fingers, sitting down and jittering one leg. After a while he noticed that he was whistling the same theme over and over; a minute's thought identified it as that exuberant mounting phrase which recurs in the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony.

He forgot about it and went on whistling. He was picturing himself aboard a ship dropping in toward Mars, making planetfall at Syrtis Major; he was seeing visions of Venus and the awesome beauty of Saturn. In his mind, he circled the Moon, and viewed the Earth as a huge bright globe against the constellations . . .

Finally the door slid aside and she appeared, carrying the usual tray of food. She smiled at him, making dimples in her golden skin and revealing a perfect set of teeth, and put the tray on the table.

"I think you are wonderful," she laughed. "You get everything

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you want, even from Swarts, and I have not been able to get even a little of what I want from him. I want to travel in time, go back to your 20th Century. And I wanted to talk with you, and he would not let me." She laughed again, hands on her rounded hips. "I have never seen him so irritated as he was this noon."

Maitland urged her into the chair and sat down on the edge of the bed. Eagerly he asked, "Why the devil do you want to go to the 20th Century? Believe me, I've been there, and what I've seen of this world looks a lot better."

She shrugged. "Swarts says that I want to go back to the Dark Age of Technology because I have not adapted well to modern culture. Myself, I think I have just a romantic nature. Far times and places look more exciting . . ."

"How do you mean—" Maitland wrinkled his brow—"adapt to modern culture? Don't tell me *you're* from another time!"

"Oh, no! But my home is Aresund, a little fishing village at the head of a fiord in what you would call Norway. So far north, we are much behind the times. We live in the old way, from the sea, speak the old tongue."

HE looked at her golden features, such a felicitous blend of Oriental and European characteristics, and hesitantly asked, "Maybe I shouldn't . . . This is a little personal, but . . . you don't look altogether like the Norwegians of my time."

His fear that she would be offended proved to be completely unjustified. She merely laughed and said, "There has been much history since 1950. Five hundred years ago, Europe was overrun by Pan-Orientals. Today you could not find anywhere a 'pure' European or Asiatic." She giggled. "Swarts' ancestors from your time must be cursing in their graves. His family is Afrikander all the way back, but one of his great-grandfathers was pure-blooded Bantu. His full name is Lassisi Swarts."

Maitland wrinkled his brow. "Afrikander?"

"The South Africans." Something strange came into her eyes. It might have been awe, or even hatred; he could not tell. "The Pan-Orientals eventually conquered all the world, except for North America—the last remnant of the American World Empire—and southern Africa. The Afrikanders had been partly isolated for several centuries then, and they had developed technology while the rest of the world lost it. They had a tradition of white supremacy, and in addition they were terrified of being encircled." She sighed. "They ruled the next

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world empire and it was founded on the slaughter of one and a half billion human beings. That went into the history books as the War of Annihilation."

"So many? How?"

"They were clever with machines, the Afrikanders. They made armies of them. Armies of invincible killing-machines, produced in robot factories from robot-mined ores . . . Very clever." She gave a little shudder.

"And yet they founded modern civilization," she added. "The grandsons of the technicians who built the Machine Army set up our robot production system, and today no human being has to dirty his hands raising food or manufacturing things. It could never have been done, either, before the population was—reduced to three hundred million."

"Then the Afrikanders are still on top? Still the masters?"

SHE shook her head. "There are no more Afrikanders."

"Rebellion?"

"No. Intermarriage. Racial blending. There was a psychology of guilt behind it. So huge a crime eventually required a proportionate expiation. Afrikaans is still the world language, but there is only one race now. No more masters or slaves."

They were both silent for a moment, and then she sighed. "Let us not talk about them any more."

"Robot factories and farms," Maitland mused. "What else? What means of transportation? Do you have interstellar flight yet?"

"Inter-what?"

"Have men visited the stars?"

She shook her head, bewildered.

"I always thought that would be a tough problem to crack," he agreed. "But tell me about what men are doing in the Solar System. How is life on Mars and Venus, and how long does it take to get to those places?"

He waited, expectantly silent, but she only looked puzzled. "I don't understand. Mars? What are Mars?"

After several seconds, Maitland swallowed. Something seemed to be the matter with his throat, making it difficult for him to speak. "Surely you have space travel?"

She frowned and shook her head. "What does that mean—space travel?"

He was gripping the edge of the bed now, glaring at her. "A civilization that could discover time travel and build robot factories wouldn't find it hard to send a ship to Mars!"

"A *ship?* Oh, you mean something like a *vliegvlotter*. Why, no, I don't suppose it would be hard. But why would anyone want to

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do a thing like that?"

He was on his feet towering over her, fists clenched. She raised her arms as if to shield her face if he should hit her. "Let's get this perfectly clear," he said, more harshly than he realized. "So far as you know, no one has ever visited the planets, and no one wants to. Is that right?"

She nodded apprehensively. "I have never heard of it being done."

He sank down on the bed and put his face in his hands. After a while he looked up and said bitterly, "You're looking at a man who would give his life to get to Mars. I thought I would in my time. I was positive I would when I knew I was in your time. And now I know I never will."

THE cot creaked beside him and he felt a soft arm about his shoulders and fingers delicately stroking his brow. Presently he opened his eyes and looked at her. "I just don't understand," he said. "It seemed obvious to me that whenever men were able to reach the planets, they'd do it."

Her pitying eyes were on his face. He hitched himself around so that he was facing her. "I've got to understand. I've got to know *why*. What happened? Why don't men want the planets any more?"

"Honestly," she said, "I did not know they ever had." She hesitated. "Maybe you are asking the wrong question."

He furrowed his brow, bewildered now by her.

"I mean," she explained, "maybe you should ask why people in the 20th Century *did* want to go to worlds men are not suited to inhabit."

Maitland felt his face become hot. "Men can go anywhere, if they want to bad enough."

"But *why?*"

Despite his sudden irrational anger toward her, Maitland tried to stick to logic. "Living space, for one thing. The only permanent solution to the population problem . . ."

"We have no population problem. A hundred years ago, we realized that the key to social stability is a limited population. Our economic system was built to take care of three hundred million people, and we have held the number at that."

"Birth control," Maitland scoffed. "How do you make it work —secret police?"

"No. Education. Each of us has the right to two children, and we cherish that right so much that we make every effort to see that those two are the best children we could possibly produce. . . ."

She broke off, looking a little self-conscious. "You understand,

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what I have been saying applies to *most* of the world. In some places like Aresund, things are different. Backward. I still do not feel that I belong here, although the people of the town have accepted me as one of them."

"Even," he said, "granting that you have solved the population problem, there's still the adventure of the thing. Surely, somewhere, there must be men who still feel that . . . Ingrid, doesn't it fire something in your blood, the idea of going to Mars—just to go there and see what's there and walk under a new sky and a smaller Sun? Aren't you interested in finding out what the canals are? Or what's under the clouds of Venus? Wouldn't you like to see the rings of Saturn from a distance of only two hundred thousand miles?" His hands were trembling as he stopped.

She shrugged her shapely shoulders. "Go into the past—yes! But go out there? I still cannot see why."

"Has the spirit of adventure *evaporated* from the human race, or *what?*"

She smiled. "In a room downstairs there is the head of a lion. Swarts killed the beast when he was a young man. He used a spear. And time traveling is the greatest adventure there is. At least, that is the way I feel. Listen, Bob." She laid a hand on his arm. "You grew up in the Age of Technology. Everybody was terribly excited about what could be done with machines—machines to blow up a city all at once, or fly around the world, or take a man to Mars. We have had our fill of—what is the word?—gadgets. Our machines serve us, and so long as they function right, we are satisfied to forget about them.

"Because this is the Age of *Man.* We are terribly interested in what can be done with people. Our scientists, like Swarts, are studying human rather than nuclear reactions. We are much more fascinated by the life and death of cultures than by the expansion or contraction of the Universe. With us, it is the people that are important, not gadgets."

Maitland stared at her, his face blank. His mind had just manufactured a discouraging analogy. His present position was like that of an earnest 12th Century crusader, deposited by some freak of nature into the year 1950, trying to find a way of reanimating the anti-Mohammedan movement. What chance would he have? The unfortunate knight would argue in vain that the atomic bomb offered a means of finally destroying the infidel . . .

Maitland looked up at the girl, who was regarding him silently with troubled eyes. "I think I'd

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like to be alone for a while," he said.

IN the morning, Maitland was tired, though not particularly depressed. He hadn't slept much, but he had come to a decision. When Ingrid woke him, he gave her a cavalier smile and a cheery "Good morning" and sat down to the eggs and ham she had brought. Then, before she could leave, he asked, "Last night when we were talking about spaceships, you mentioned some kind of vessel or vehicle. What was it?"

She thought. *"Vliegvlotter?* Was that it?"

He nodded emphatically. "Tell me about them."

"Well, they are — cars, you might say, with wheels that go into the body when you take off. They can do, oh, 5,000 miles an hour in the ionosphere, 50 miles up."

"Fifty miles," Maitland mused. "Then they're sealed tight, so the air doesn't leak out?" Ingrid nodded. "How do they work? Rocket drive?"

"No." She plucked at her lower lip. "I do not understand it very well. You could picture something that hooks into a gravity field, and pulls. A long way from the Earth it would not work very well, because the field is so thin there . . . I guess I just cannot explain it very well to you."

"That's all I need." Maitland licked his lips and frowned. "On that point, anyway. Another thing —Swarts told me I'd be here for about a week. Is there any set procedure involved in that? Have other persons been brought to this period from the past?"

She laughed. "Thousands. Swarts has published nearly a hundred case studies himself, and spent time adding up to years in the 19th and 20th centuries."

Maitland interrupted incredulously. "How on Earth could he ever manage to keep that many disappearances quiet? Some of those people would be bound to talk."

She shook her head definitely. "The technique was designed to avoid just that. There is a method of 'fading' the memories people have of their stay here. The episode is always accepted as a period of amnesia, in the absence of a better explanation."

"Still, in thousands of cases..."

"Spread out over centuries in a total population of billions."

He laughed. "You're right. But will that be done to me?"

"I suppose so. I can't imagine Swarts letting you take your memories back with you."

Maitland looked out the window at the green horizon. "We'll see," he said.

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MAITLAND removed his three-day beard with an effective depilatory cream he discovered in the bathroom, and settled down to wait. When Swarts arrived, the engineer said quietly, "Sit down, please. I have to talk with you."

Swarts gave him the look of a man with a piece of equipment that just won't function right, and remained standing. "What is it now?"

"Look," Maitland said, "Ingrid has told me that men never reached the planets. *You* ought to know how I feel about space flight. It's my whole life. Knowing that my work on rockets is going to pay off only in the delivery of bombs, I don't want to go back to the 20th Century. I want to stay here."

Swarts said slowly, "That's impossible."

"Now, look, if you want me to cooperate . . ."

The big man made an impatient gesture. "Not impossible because of me. Physically impossible. Impossible because of the way time travel works."

Maitland stared at him suspiciously.

"To displace a mass from its proper time takes energy," Swarts explained, "and it's one of the oldest general physical principles that higher energy states are unstable with respect to lower ones. Are you familiar with elementary quantum theory? As an analogy, you might regard yourself, displaced from your proper time, as an atom in an excited state. The system is bound to drop back to ground state. In the atomic case, the time which elapses before that transition occurs is a matter of probabilities. In the case of time travel, it just depends on the amount of mass and the number of years the mass is displaced.

"In short, the laws of nature will insist on your returning to 1950 in just a few days."

Maitland looked at the floor for a while, and his shoulders sagged. "Your memories of this will be faded," Swarts said. "You'll forget about what Ingrid has told you—forget you were ever here, and take up your life where you left off. You were happy working on rockets, weren't you?"

"But—" Maitland shook his head despairingly. Then he had an idea. "Will you let me do *one* thing, before I go back? I realize now that our time is limited, and you have a lot of tests to give me, but I'm willing to help speed things up. I want to see the stars, just once, from deep space. I know you'll make me forget it ever happened, but once in my life . . . You have vessels—*vlieg-vlotter,* Ingrid called them—that can go into space. If you'd give me just a couple days to go out

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there, maybe circle the Moon...?" There was a pleading note in his voice, but he didn't care.

Swarts regarded him dispassionately for a moment, then nodded. "Sure," he said. "Now let's get to work."

"THE Earth doesn't change much," Maitland mused. Sitting on the cot, his arm around Ingrid's yielding waist, he was wearing the new blue trunks she had given him to replace his rumpled pajamas. The room was full of evening sunlight, and in that illumination she was more beautiful than any other woman he could remember. This had been the last day of tests; tomorrow, Swarts had promised, he would begin his heart-breakingly brief argosy to the Moon, with Ingrid as pilot.

Over the past four days, he had been with the girl a lot. In the beginning, he realized, she had been drawn to him as a symbol of an era she longed, but was unable, to visit. Now she understood him better, knew more about him—and Maitland felt that now she liked him for himself.

She had told him of her childhood in backward Aresund and of loneliness here at the school in Nebraska. "Here," she had said, "parents spend most of their time raising their children; at home, they just let us grow. Every time one of these people looks at me I feel inferior."

She had confided her dream of visiting far times and places, then had finished, "I doubt that Swarts will ever let me go back. He thinks I am too irresponsible. Probably he is right. But it is terribly discouraging. Sometimes I think the best thing for me would be to go home to the fiord . . ."

Now, sitting in the sunset glow, Maitland was in a philosophic mood. "The color of grass, the twilight, the seasons, the stars—those things haven't changed." He gestured out the window at the slumbering evening prairie. "That scene, save for unessentials, could just as well be 1950—or 950. It's only human institutions that change rapidly . . ."

"I'll be awfully sorry when you go back," she sighed. "You're the first person I've met here that I can talk to."

"Talk to," he repeated, dissatisfied. "You're just about the finest girl I've ever met."

He kissed her, playfully, but when they separated there was nothing playful left about it. Her face was flushed and he was breathing faster than he had been. Savagely, he bit the inside of his cheek. "Two days! A lifetime here wouldn't be long enough!"

"Bob." She touched his arm and her lips were trembling. "Bob, do you have to go—out there? We

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could get a couple of horses tomorrow, and we would have two days."

He leaned back and shook his head. "Can't you see, Ingrid? This is my only chance. If I don't go tomorrow, I'll never get to the Moon. And then my whole life won't mean anything . . ."

HE woke with Ingrid shaking him. "Bob! Bob!" Her voice was an urgent whisper. "You've got to wake up quick! Bob!"

He sat up and brushed the hair out of his eyes. "What's the matter?"

"I didn't really believe that Swarts would let you go into space. It wasn't like him. Bob, he fooled you. *Today* is when your time runs out!"

Maitland swallowed hard, and his chest muscles tightened convulsively. "You mean it was all a trick?"

She nodded. "He told me just now, while he was putting something in your milk to make you sleep." Her face was bitter and resentful. "He said, 'This is a lesson for you, Ching, if you ever do any work with individuals like this. You have to humor them, tell them anything they want to believe, in order to get your data.' "

Maitland put his feet on the floor, stood up. His face was white and he was breathing fast.

She grasped his arm. "What

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are you going to do?"

He shook her hand off. "I may not get to the Moon, but I'm going to teach one superman the advantage of honesty!"

"Wait! That won't get you anywhere."

"He may be bigger than I am," Maitland gritted, "but—"

She squeezed his arm violently. "You don't understand. He would *not* fight you. He'd use a gun."

"If I could catch him by surprise . . ."

She took hold of his shoulders firmly. "Now, listen, Bob Maitland. I love you. And I think it's the most important thing in the world that you get to see the stars. Swarts will never let me time travel, anyway."

"What are you thinking?"

"I'll go down to the village and get a *vliegvlotter*. It won't take twenty minutes. I'll come back, see that Swarts is out of the way, let you out of here, and take you—" she hesitated, but her eyes were steady—"wherever you want to go."

He was trembling. "Your career. I can't let you . . ."

She made as if to spit, then grinned. "My career! It's time I went home to the fiord, anyway. Now you wait here!"

THE *vliegvlotter* was about 50 feet long, an ellipsoid of revolution. Maitland and Ingrid ran hand in hand across the lawn and she pushed him up through the door, then slammed it shut and screwed the pressure locks tight.

They were strapping themselves into the seats, bathed in sunlight that flooded down through the thick plastic canopy, when she stopped, pale with consternation.

"What the matter?" he demanded.

"Oh, Bob," I forgot! We can't do this!"

"We're going to," he said grimly.

"Bob, *sometime this morning you're going to snap back to 1950.* If that happens while we're up there . . ."

His jaw went slack as the implication soaked in. Then he reached over and finished fastening the buckle on her wide seat belt.

"Bob, I can't. I would be killing you just as surely as . . ."

"Never mind that. You can tell me how to run this thing and then get out, if you want to."

She reached slowly forward and threw a switch, took hold of the wheel. Seconds later they were plummeting into the blue dome of the sky.

The blue became darker, purplish, and stars appeared in daylight. Maitland gripped the edge of the seat; somewhere inside him it seemed that a chorus of angels

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was singing the finale of Beethoven's Ninth.

There was a *ping* and Ingrid automatically flicked a switch. A screen lit up and the image of Swarts was looking at them. His eyes betrayed some unfamiliar emotion, awe or fear. "Ching! Come back here at once. Don't you realize that—"

"Sorry, Swarts." Maitland's voice resonated with triumph. "You'll just have to humor me once more."

"Maitland! Don't you know that you're going to snap back to the 20th Century in half an hour? You'll be in space with no protection. You'll explode!"

"I know," Maitland said. He looked up through the viewport. "Right now, I'm seeing the stars as I've never seen them before. Sorry to make you lose a case, Swarts, but this is better than dying of pneumonia or an atomic bomb."

He reached forward and snapped the image off.

TWENTY minutes later, Maitland had Ingrid cut the drive and turn the ship, so that he could see the Earth. It was there, a huge shining globe against the constellations, 10,000 miles distant, 100 times the size of familiar Luna. North America was directly below, part of Canada covered with a dazzling area of clouds. The polar ice-cap was visible in its entirety, along with the northern portions of the Eurasian land mass. The line of darkness cut off part of Alaska and bisected the Pacific Ocean, and the Sun's reflection in the Atlantic was blinding.

And there was Venus, a brilliant white jewel against the starry blackness of interstellar space, and now he could see the Sun's corona . . .

The ship was rotating slowly, and presently the Moon, at first quarter, came into view, not perceptibly larger than seen from Earth. Maitland heaved a sigh of regret. If only this could have been but the beginning of a voyage . . .

Ingrid touched his arm. "Bob."

He turned to look at her golden beauty.

"Bob, give me one more kiss."

He loosened his seat strap and put his arms around her. For a moment he felt her soft lips on his . . .

Then she was gone, and the ship had vanished. For perhaps as long as a second, alone in space, he was looking with naked, unprotected, ambition-sated eyes at the distant stars.

The luring white blaze of Venus was the last image he took with him into the night without stars.

—WILLIAM L. BADE

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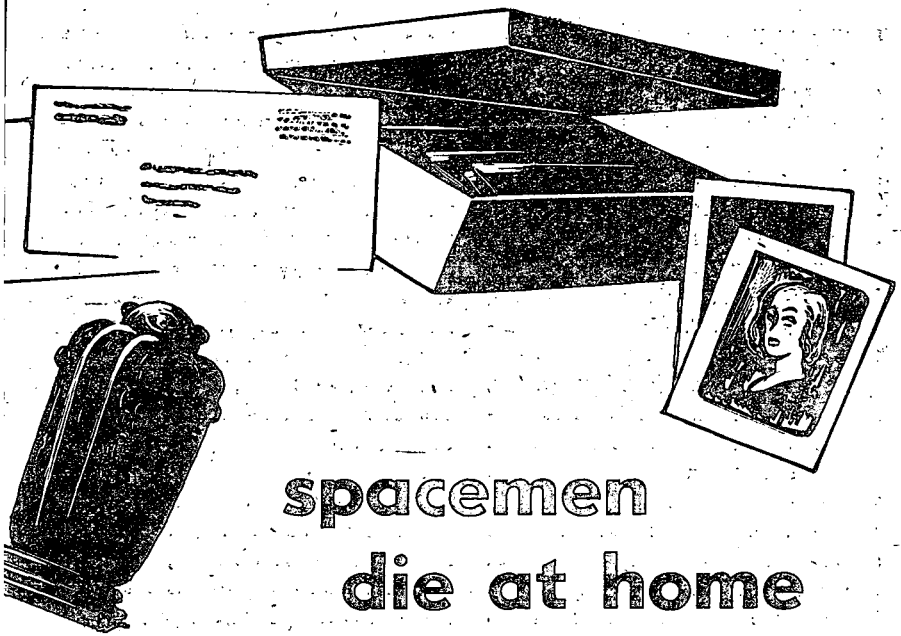

spacemen die at home

By EDWARD W. LUDWIG

One man's retreat is another's prison . . . and it takes a heap of flying to make a hulk a home!

FORTY days of heaven and forty nights of hell. That's the way it's been, Laura. But how can I make you understand? How can I tell you what it's like to be young and a man and to dream of reaching the stars? And yet, at the same time, to be filled with a terrible, gnawing fear—a fear locked in my mind during the day and bursting out like an evil jack-in-the-box at night. I must tell you, Laura.

Perhaps if I start at the begin-

Illustrated by THORNE

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ning, the very beginning . . .

It was the Big Day. All the examinations, the physicals and psychos, were over. The Academy, with its great halls and classrooms and laboratories, lay hollow and silent, an exhausted thing at sleep after spawning its first-born.

For it was June in this year of 1995, and we were the graduating class of the U. S. Academy of Interplanetary Flight.

The *first* graduating class, Laura. That's why it was so important, because we were the *first*.

We sat on a little platform, twenty-five of us. Below us was a beach of faces, most of them strange, shining like pebbles in the warm New Mexican sunlight. They were the faces of mothers and fathers and grandparents and kid brothers and sisters—the people who a short time ago had been only scrawled names on letters from home or words spoken wistfully at Christmas. They were the memory-people who, to me, had never really existed.

But today they had become real, and they were here and looking at us with pride in their eyes.

A voice was speaking, deep, sure, resonant. ". . . these boys have worked hard for six years, and now they're going to do a lot of big things. They're going to bring us the metals and minerals that we desperately need. They're going to find new land for our colonists, good rich land that will bear food and be a home for our children. And perhaps most important of all, they'll make other men think of the stars and look up at them and feel humility—for mankind needs humility."

The speaker was Robert Chandler, who'd brought the first rocket down on Mars just five years ago, who'd established the first colony there, and who had just returned from his second hop to Venus.

Instead of listening to his words, I was staring at his broad shoulders and his dark, crew-cut hair and his white uniform which was silk-smooth and skin-tight. I was worshiping him and hating him at the same time, for I was thinking:

He's already reached Mars and Venus. Let him leave Jupiter and the others alone! Let us be the first to land somewhere! Let us be the first!

MICKEY Cameron, sitting next to me, dug an elbow into my ribs. "I don't see 'em, Ben," he whispered. "Where do you suppose they are?"

I blinked. "Who?"

"My folks."

That was something I didn't have to worry about. My parents had died in a strato-jet crash when I was four, so I hadn't

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needed many of those "You are cordially invited" cards. Just one, which I'd sent to Charlie Taggart.

Stardust Charlie, we called him, although I never knew why. He was a veteran of Everson's first trip to the Moon nearly twenty-five years ago, and he was still at it. He was Chief Jetman now on the *Lunar Lady,* a commercial ore ship on a shuttle between Luna City and White Sands.

I remembered how, as a kid, I'd pestered him in the Long Island Spaceport, tagging after him like a puppy, and how he'd grown to like me until he became father, mother, and buddy all in one to me. And I remembered, too, how his recommendation had finally made me a cadet.

My gaze wandered over the faces, but I couldn't find Charlie's. It wasn't surprising. The *Lunar Lady* was in White Sands now, but liberties, as Charlie said, were as scarce as water on Mars.

It doesn't matter, I told myself.

Then Mickey stiffened. "I see 'em, Ben! There in the fifth row!"

Usually Mickey was the same whether in a furnace-hot engine room or a garden party, smiling, accepting whatever the world offered. But now a tenseness and an excitement had gripped even him. I was grateful that he was beside me; we'd been a good team during those final months at the Academy and I knew we'd be a good team in space. The Universe was mighty big, but with two of us to face it together, it would be only half as big.

And then it seemed that all the proud faces were looking at us as if we were gods. A shiver went through my body. Though it was daytime, I saw the stars in my mind's vision, the great shining balls of silver, each like a voice crying out and pleading to be explored, to be touched by the sons of Earth.

They expect a lot from us. They expect us to make a new kind of civilization and a better place out of Earth. They expect all this and a hell of a lot more. They think there's nothing we can't do.

I felt very small and very humble. I was scared. Damned scared.

AT last it was over, and the proud faces descended upon us in a huge, babbling wave.

Then I saw him. Good old Stardust Charlie.

His wizened little body was shuffling down an aisle, his eyes shining like a child's. He'd been sandwiched, evidently, in one of the rear rows.

But he wasn't the Charlie I'd seen a year ago. He'd become gaunt and old, and he walked

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with an unnatural stiffness. He looked so old that it was hard to believe he'd once been young.

He scratched his mop of steel-gray hair and grinned.

"You made it, boy," he chortled, "and by Jupiter, we'll celebrate tonight. Yes, siree, I got twenty-four hours, and we'll celebrate as good spacemen should!"

Then Mickey strode up to us. He was his normal, boyish self again, walking lightly, his blond, curly-haired skull swaying as if in rhythm with some silent melody.

And you, Laura, were with him.

"Meet the Brat," he said. "My sister Laura."

I stared almost rudely. You were like a doll lost in the immensity of your fluffy pink dress. Your hair was long and transformed into a golden froth where sunlight touched it. But your eyes were the eyes of a woman, glowing like dark stars and reflecting a softness, a gentleness that I'd never seen in eyes before.

"I'm happy to meet you, Ben," you said. "I've heard of no one else for the past year."

A tide of heat crept up from my collar. I stuttered through an introduction of Charlie.

You and Mickey looked strangely at Charlie, and I realized that old Stardust was not a cadet's notion of the ideal spaceman. Charlie scorned the skin-tight uniforms of the government service and wore a shiny black suit that was a relic of Everson's early-day Moon Patrol. His tie was clumsily knotted, and a button on his coat was missing.

And the left side of his face was streaked with dark scar tissue, the result of an atomic blowup on one of the old Moon ships. I was so accustomed to the scars, I was seldom aware of them; but others, I knew, would find them ugly.

You were kind. You shook hands and said, softly: "It's a privilege to meet you, Charlie. Just think—one of Everson's men, one of the first to reach the Moon!"

Charlie gulped helplessly, and Mickey said: "Still going to spend the weekend with us, aren't you, Ben?"

I shook my head. "Charlie has only twenty-four hours liberty. We're planning to see the town tonight."

"Why don't you both come with us?" you asked. "Our folks have their own plane, so it would be no problem. And we've got a big guest room. Charlie, wouldn't you like a home-cooked meal before going back to the Moon?"

Charlie's answer was obscured by a sudden burst of coughing. I knew that he'd infinitely prefer to spend his liberty sampling Martian fizzes and Plutonian zombies.

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But this night seemed too sacred for Charlie's kind of celebration.

"We'd really like to come," I said.

ON our way to the 'copter parking field, Dean Dawson passed us. He was a tall, willowy man, spectacled, looking the way an academy professor should look.

"Ben," he called, "don't forget that offer. Remember you've got two months to decide."

"No, thanks," I answered. "Better not count on me."

A moment later Mickey said, frowning, "What was he talking about, Ben? Did he make you an offer?"

I laughed. "He offered me a job here at the Academy teaching astrogation. What a life *that* would be! Imagine standing in a classroom for forty years when I've got the chance to—"

I hesitated, and you supplied the right words: "When you've got the chance to be the first to reach a new planet. That's what most of you want, isn't it? That's what Mickey used to want."

I looked at you as if you were Everson himself, because you seemed to understand the hunger that could lie in a man's heart.

Then your last words came back and jabbed me: "That's what Mickey used to want."

"*Used* to want?" I asked. "What do you mean?"

You bit your lip, not answering.

"What did she mean, Mickey?"

Mickey looked down at his feet. "I didn't want to tell you yet, Ben. We've been together a long time, planning to be on a rocket. But—"

"Yes?"

"Well, what does it add up to? You become a spaceman and wear a pretty uniform. You wade through the sands of Mars and the dust of Venus. If you're lucky, you're good for five, maybe ten years. Then one thing or another gets you. They don't insure rocketmen, you know."

My stomach was full of churning, biting ice. "What are you trying to say, Mickey?"

"I've thought about it a long time. They want me for Cargo Supervisor of White Sands Port." He raised his hand to stop me. "I know. It's not so exciting. I'll just live a lot longer. I'm sorry, Ben."

I couldn't answer. It was as if someone had whacked the back of my knees with the blast of a jet.

"It doesn't change anything, Ben—right now, I mean. We can still have a good weekend."

Charlie was muttering under his breath, smoldering like a bomb about to reach critical mass. I shook my head dazedly at him as we got to the 'copter.

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"Sure," I said to Mickey, "we can still have a good weekend."

I LIKED your folks, Laura. There was no star-hunger in them, of course. They were simple and solid and settled, like green growing things, deep-rooted, belonging to Earth. They were content with a home that was cool on this warm summer night, with a 'copter and a tri-dimensional video, and a handsome automatic home that needed no servants or housework.

Stardust Charlie was as comfortable as a Martian sand-monkey in a shower, but he tried courageously to be himself.

At the dinner table he stared glassily at nothing and grated, "Only hit Mars once, but I'll never forget the kid who called himself a medic. Skipper started coughing, kept it up for three days. Whoopin' cough, the medic says, not knowin' the air had chemicals that turned to acid in your lungs. I'd never been to Mars before, but I knew better'n that. Hell, I says, that ain't whoopin' cough, that's lung-rot."

That was when your father said he wasn't so hungry after all.

Afterward, you and I walked onto the terrace, into the moonlit night, to watch for crimson-tailed continental rockets that occasionally streaked up from White Sands.

We gazed for a few seconds up into the dark sky, and then you said: "Charlie is funny, isn't he? He's nice and I'm glad he's here, but he's sort of funny."

"He's an old-time spaceman. You didn't need much education in those days, just a lot of brawn and a quick mind. It took guts to be a spaceman then."

"But he wasn't always a spaceman. Didn't he ever have a family?"

I smiled and shook my head. "If he had, he never mentioned it. Charlie doesn't like to be sentimental, at least not on the outside. As far as I know, his life began when he took off for the Moon with Everson."

You stared at me strangely, almost in a sacred kind of way. I knew suddenly that you liked me, and my heart began to beat faster.

There was silence.

You were lovely, your soft hair like strands of gold, and there were flecks of silver in your dark eyes. Somehow I was afraid. I had the feeling that I shouldn't have come here.

You kept looking at me until I had to ask: "What are you thinking, Laura?"

You laughed, but it was a sad, fearful laugh. "No, I shouldn't be thinking it. You'd hate me if I told you, and I wouldn't want that."

"I could never hate you."

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"It—it's about the stars," you said very softly. "I understand why you want to go to them. Mickey and I used to dream about them when we were kids. Of course I was a girl, so it was just a game to me. But once I dreamed of going to England. Oh, it was going to be so wonderful. I lived for months, just thinking about it.

"One summer we went. I had fun. I saw the old buildings and castles, and the spaceports and the Channel Tube. But after it was over, I realized England wasn't so different from America. Places seem exciting before you get to them, and afterward they're not really."

I frowned. "And you mean it might be the same with the stars? You think maybe I haven't grown up yet?"

Anxiety darkened your features. "No, it'd be good to be a spaceman, to see the strange places and make history. But is it worth it? Is it worth the things you'd have to give up?"

I didn't understand at first, and I wanted to ask, "Give up *what?*"

Then I looked at you and the promise in your eyes, and I knew.

All through the years I'd been walking down a single, narrow path.

Government boarding school, the Academy, my eyes always upward and on the stars.

Now I'd stumbled into a crossroads, beholding a strange new path that I'd never noticed before.

You can go into space, I thought, *and try to do as much living in ten years as normal men do in fifty. You can be like Everson, who died in a Moon crash at the age of 36, or like a thousand others who lie buried in Martian sand and Venusian dust. Or, if you're lucky, like Charlie—a kind of human meteor streaking through space, eternally alone, never finding a home.*

Or there's the other path. To stay on this little prison of an Earth in cool, comfortable houses. To be one of the solid, rooted people with a wife and kids. To be one of the people who live long enough to grow old, who awake to the song of birds instead of rocket grumblings, who fill their lungs with the clean rich air of Earth instead of poisonous dust.

"I'm sorry," you said. "I didn't mean to make you sad, Ben."

"It's all right," I said, clenching my fists. "You made sense—a lot of sense."

THE next morning Charlie said good-bye in our room. He rubbed his scarred face nervously as he cleared his throat with a series of thin, tight coughs.

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Then he pointed to a brown, faded tin box lying on the bed. "I'm leavin' that for you. It's full of old stuff, souvenirs mostly. Thought maybe you'd like to have 'em."

I scowled, not understanding. "Why, Charlie? What for?"

He shrugged as if afraid he might be accused of sentimentality. "Oh, it's just that I've been dodgin' meteors now for twenty-five years. That's a long time, boy. Ain't one spaceman in a thousand that lucky. Some of these days, I won't be so lucky."

I tried to laugh. "You're good for another twenty-five years, Charlie."

He shook his head stiffly, staring at nothing. "Maybe. Anyway, I'm gonna get off the Shuttle this time, make one more trip to Mars. Tell you what. There's a little stone cafe on Mars, the *Space Rat,* just off Chandler Field on the Grand Canal. When you get to Mars, take a look inside. I'll probably be there."

He coughed again, a deep, rasping cough that filled his eyes with tears.

"Not used to this Earth air," he muttered. "What I need's some Martian climate."

Suddenly that cough frightened me. It didn't seem normal. I wondered, too, about his stiff movements and glassy stare. It was as if he were drugged.

I shook the thought away. If Charlie was sick, he wouldn't talk about going to Mars. The medics wouldn't let him go even as far as Luna.

We watched him leave, you and Mickey and I.

"When will you be back?" you asked.

Charlie's hard face contorted itself into a gargoylish grin. "Maybe a couple of months, maybe a couple of years. You know spacemen."

Then he waved and strode away, a strange, gray, withered gnome of a man.

I wanted him to say something, to tell me the secret that would kill the doubt worming through my brain.

But he rounded a corner, still grinning and waving, and then he was gone.

THAT afternoon Mickey showed me his room. It was more like a boy's room than a spaceman's. In it were all the little things that kids treasure—pennants, models of Eversons two ships, a tennis trophy, books, a home-made video.

I began to realize how important a room like this could be to a boy. I could imagine, too, the happiness that parents felt as they watched their children grow to adulthood.

I'd missed something. My folks

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were shadow-people, my impressions of them drawn half from ancient photos, half from imagination. For me, it had been a cold, automatic kind of life, the life of dormitories and routines and rules. I'd been so blinded by the brilliancy of my dreams, I hadn't realized I was different.

My folks were killed in a rocket crash. If it weren't for rockets, I'd have lived the kind of life a kid should live.

Mickey noticed my frown.

"What's the matter, Ben? Still sore? I feel like a heel, but I'm just not like you and Charlie, I guess. I—"

"No, I understand, Mickey. I'm not sore, really."

"Listen, then. You haven't accepted any offer yet, have you?"

"No. I got a couple of possibilities. Could get a berth on the *Odyssey*, the new ship being finished at Los Angeles. They want me, too, for the Moon Patrol, but that's old stuff, not much better than teaching. I want to be in deep space."

"Well, how about staying with us till you decide? Might as well enjoy Earth life while you can. Okay?"

I felt like running from the house, to forget that it existed. I wanted someone to tell me one of the old stories about space, a tale of courage that would put fuel on dying dreams.

But I wanted, also, to be with you, Laura, to see your smile and the flecks of silver in your eyes and the way your nose turned upward ever so slightly when you laughed. You see, I loved you already, almost as much as I loved the stars.

And I said, slowly, my voice sounding unfamiliar and far away, "Sure, I'll stay, Mickey. Sure."

FORTY days of joy, forty nights of fear and indecision. We did all the little things, like watching the rockets land at White Sands and flying down to the Gulf to swim in cool waters. You tried, unsuccessfully, to teach me to dance, and we talked about Everson and Charlie and the Moon and the stars. You felt you had to give the stars all the beauty and promise of a child's dream, because you knew that was what I wanted.

One morning I thought, *Why must I make a choice? Why can't I have both you and the stars? Would that be asking too much?*

All day the thought lay in my mind like fire.

That evening I asked you to marry me. I said it very simply: "Laura, I want you to be my wife."

You looked up at Venus, and you were silent for a long while, your face flushed.

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Then you murmured, "I—I want to marry you, Ben, but are you asking me to marry a spaceman or a teacher?"

"Can't a spaceman marry, too?"

"Yes, a spaceman can marry, but what would it be like? Don't you see, Ben? You'd be like Charlie. Gone for *maybe* two months, *maybe* two years. Then you'd have a twenty-four hour liberty—and I'd have what?"

Somehow I'd expected words like these, but still they hurt. "I wouldn't have to be a spaceman forever. I could try it for a couple of years, then teach."

"Would you, Ben? Would you be satisfied with just seeing Mars? Wouldn't you want to go on to Jupiter and Saturn and Uranus and on and on?"

Your voice was choked, and even in the semi-darkness I saw tears glittering in your eyes.

"Do you think I'd dare have children, Ben? Mickey told me what happened on the *Cyclops*. There was a leak in the atomic engines. The ship was flooded with radiation—just for a second. It didn't seem serious. The men had no burns. But a year later the captain had a child. And it was—"

"I know, Laura. Don't say it."

You had to finish. "It was a monster."

That night I lay awake, the fears and doubts too frantic to let me sleep.

You've got to decide now, I told myself. *You can't stay here. You've got to make a choice.*

The teaching job was still open. The spot on the *Odyssey* was still open—and the big ship, it was rumored, was equipped to make it all the way to Pluto.

You can take Dean Dawson's job and stay with Laura and have kids and a home and live to see what happens in this world sixty years from now.

Or you can see what's on the other side of the mountain. You can be a line in a history book.

I cursed. I knew what Charlie would say. He'd say, "Get the hell out of there, boy. Don't let a fool woman make a sucker out of you. Get out there on the *Odyssey*, where you belong. We got a date on Mars, remember? At the *Space Rat,* just off Chandler Field on the Grand Canal."

That's what he'd say.

And yet I wanted you, Laura. I wanted to be with you, always.

"Oh God," I moaned, "what shall I do?"

NEXT morning the door chimes pealed, and you went to the door and brought back the audiogram. It was addressed to me; I wondered who could be sending me a message.

I pressed the stud on the little

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gray cylinder, and a rasping, automatic voice droned: "Luna City, Luna, July 27, 1995. Regret to inform you of death of Charles Taggart, Chief Jetman . . ."

Then there was a Latin name which was more polite than the word "lung-rot" and the metallic phrase, "This message brought to you by courtesy of United Nations Earth-Luna Communication Corps."

I stood staring at the cylinder.

Charles Taggart was dead.

Charles Taggart was Charlie. Stardust Charlie.

My heart thudded crazily against my chest. It couldn't be! Not Charlie! The audiogram had lied!

I pressed the stud again. " . . . regret to inform you of death of Charles . . ."

I hurled the cylinder at the wall. It thudded, fell, rolled. The broken voice droned on.

You ran to it, shut it off. "I'm sorry, Ben, so terribly—"

Without answering, I walked into my room. I knew it was true now. I remembered Charlie's coughing, his gaunt features, his drugged gaze. The metallic words had told the truth.

I sat for a long time on my bed, crying inside, but staring dry-eyed at Charlie's faded tin box.

Then, finally, I fingered his meager possessions—a few wrinkled photos, some letters, a small black statue of a forgotten Martian god, a gold service medal from the Moon Patrol.

This was what remained of Charlie after twenty-five years in space. It was a bitter bargain. A statue instead of a wife, yellowed letters instead of children, a medal instead of a home.

It'd be a great future, I thought. *You'd dream of sitting in a dingy stone dive on the Grand Canal with sand-wasps buzzing around smoky, stinking candles. A bottle of luchu juice and a couple of Martian girls with dirty feet for company. And a sudden cough that would be the first sign of lung-rot.*

To hell with it!

I walked into your living room and called Dean Dawson on the visiphone.

I accepted that job teaching.

AND now, Laura, it's nearly midnight. You're in your room, sleeping, and the house is silent.

It's hard to tell you, to make you understand, and that is why I am writing this.

I looked through Charlie's box again, more carefully this time, reading the old letters and studying the photographs. I believe now that Charlie sensed my indecision, that he left these things so that they could tell me what he could not express in words.

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And among the things, Laura, I found a ring.

A wedding ring.

In that past he never talked about, there was a woman—his wife. Charlie was young once, his eyes full of dreams, and he faced the same decision that I am facing. Two paths were before him, but he tried to travel both. He later learned what we already know—that there can be no compromise. And you know, too, which path he finally chose.

Do you know why he had to drug himself to watch me graduate? So he could look at me, knowing that I would see the worlds he could never live to see. Charlie didn't leave just a few trinkets behind him. He left himself, Laura, for he showed me that a boy's dream can also be a man's dream.

He made his last trip to Luna when he knew he was going to die. Heaven knows how he escaped a checkup. Maybe the captain understood and was kind—but that doesn't matter now.

Do you know *why* he wanted to reach Mars? Do you know why he didn't want to die in the clean, cool air of Earth?

It was because he wanted to die nearer home. His home, Laura, was the Universe, where the ship was his house, the crew his father, mother, brothers, the planets his children.

You say that the beauty of the other side of the mountain vanishes after you reach it. But how can one ever be *sure* until the journey is made? Could I or Charlie or the thousand before us bear to look upon a star and think, *I might have gone there; I could have been the first?*

We said, too, that the life of a spaceman is lonely. Yet how could one be lonely when men like Charlie roam the spaceways?

Charlie wanted me to himself that night after graduation. He wanted us to celebrate as spacemen should, for he knew that this would be his last night on Earth. It might have seemed an ugly kind of celebration to you, but he wanted it with all his heart, and we robbed him of it.

Because of these things, Laura, I will be gone in the morning. Explain the best you can to Mickey and to your parents and Dean Dawson.

Right now I've got a date that I'm going to keep—at a dingy stone cafe on Mars, the *Space Rat,* just off Chandler Field on the Grand Canal.

Stardust Charlie will be there; he'll go with me in memory to whatever part of the Galaxy I may live to reach. And so will you, Laura.

I have two wedding rings with me—his wife's ring and yours.

—EDWARD W. LUDWIG

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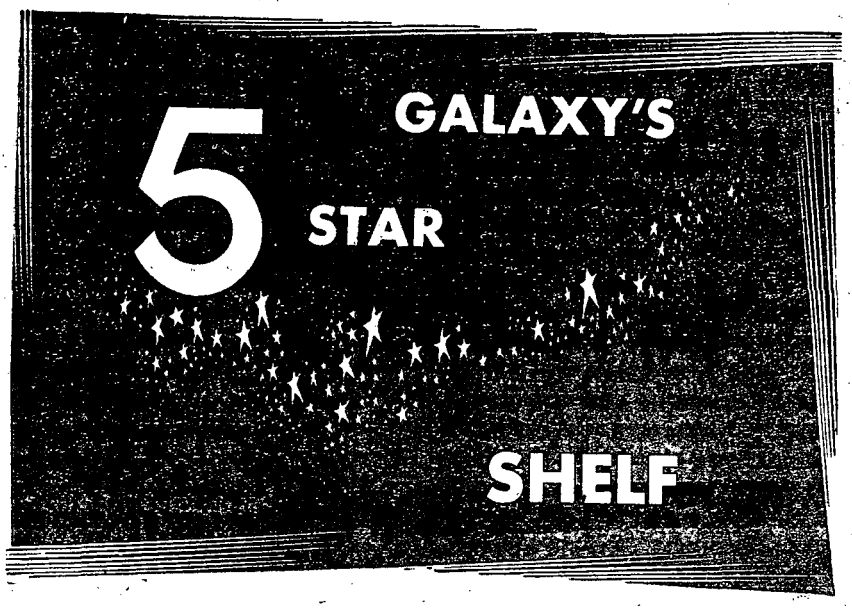

THE UNDESIRED PRINCESS, by L. Sprague de Camp. Fantasy Publishing Co., Inc., Los Angeles, 1951. 248 pages, $3.00.
ROGUE QUEEN, by L. Sprague de Camp. Doubleday & Co., Inc., New York, 1951. 222 pages, $2.75.

THESE volumes show why de Camp has puzzled and exasperated his fans.

The Undesired Princess is a pure pseudo-fairy tale adventure about a character named Rollin Hobart who is translated into an Aristotelian world called Logeia. Here things either are or are not whatever they are, with no in-betweens. A social lion is a real lion. The princess, being a fairy tale princess, is perfect—painfully so. Everything in the tale has this haywire quality of being or not being, plus a lot of pleasant de Campish plotcident and nonsense along with it.

The F.P.C.I. volume is fattened out by the inclusion of a 34-page short story called *Mr. Arson*. This one has to do with how a character named Grinnig bought himself a correspondence course on

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Nigromancy, conjured up one of the Paracelsian fire demons called the Saldine, and got himself and a lot of other nice people into some hot—but *very* hot—water.

Both these fantasies are clever, glib, and wholly unimportant. They can almost be counted on to depress the true believer in de Camp.

Rogue Queen is something else again. This is without doubt the best item de Camp has yet developed out of his concept of *Viagens Interplanetarias,* the Portugese-speaking monopoly that controls all Terran space travel.

In *Rogue Queen,* a novel never published before, we find ourselves in a strange feminist civilization—one which is essentially humanoid, but similar to that of the bee. The meticulously scientific way in which de Camp develops details of this culture on a far-distant planet to parallel a bee society is fascinating. Men are literally nothing but drones, and most females mere workers.

With the arrival of the *Viagens Interplanetarias* spaceship *Paris,* bearing a load of scientists and explorers from Earth, a chain of events is begun which terminates in the reconversion of this abnormal society back to the beginnings of a more natural way of life.

The story of how this is accomplished is made so circumstantially real, so humanly plausible, that the book becomes a sheer delight to read—particularly after the bombasts and atom blasts of much modern science fiction. And more especially after the saddening amount of routine wordage de Camp has been producing. I hope he stays off the literary treadmill for good.

BEYOND INFINITY, by Robert Spencer Carr. Fantasy Press, Reading, Pa., 1951. 236 pages, $2.75.

FOUR long short stories, at least two of them reprinted from *The Saturday Evening Post.*

The title story, *Beyond Infinity,* is a long, curiously unconvincing tale about how a certain type of space-time travel makes the travelers live backward so that, upon returning from a decades-long voyage, they have become young people again.

Morning Star has to do with the attempts of manless Venus to get some nice young men from Earth to settle there and give Venusian women a chance at normal reproductive procedures, rather than their current parthenogetic way. This is all mixed up with a hush-hush super-secret war rocket project on Earth, a lot of terribly brilliant scientists, and a plan to Get To Mars Before The Reds Do.

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Those Men from Mars is about the best of this crop—an engaging though superficial tale of how the Martians land a ship on the White House lawn and another inside the Kremlin, and how the two societies work on their respective Martians to place the enormous scientific resources of their planet on one or the other side.

Weak ending . . .

The fourth tale, *Mutation*, is about post-atomic-war chaos, and the white and shining, angelic mutated boys and girls that spring phoenixlike from this chaos. A very old-hat conception, but smoothly carried out.

Pleasant reading, not top-drawer science fiction.

ROCKETS, MISSILES AND SPACE TRAVEL, by Willy Ley. The Viking Press, New York, 1951. 432 pages plus xii plus 12 pages of illustrations plus a folded chart, "Characteristics of the Earth's Atmosphere," inside the back cover; $5.95.

THIS is the last word, the complete book, the authoritative job on rockets — good enough, without question, to serve as a primary textbook, reference volume and handbook for everyone with a serious interest in the subject, and also to introduce those who know nothing about it to the Great Science of Tomorrow — Space Travel.

The book carries you straight through from the classical aeolipile of Heron of Alexandria to (and here I quote chapter headings) "The Rocket into Cosmic Space," "The Spaceship," and "Terminal in Space." In between, it gives you all the historical background there is, and great gobs of the science, too.

There is the engrossing story of the German Rocket Society of the 1920s, in which Ley himself played an important part; there is what we know of Peenemunde, birthplace of the V-1 and the V-2; and there is as much as can be told—which is more than you may think—about White Sands and its work. The guided missiles aspect is, of course, now emphasized far beyond its previous weight in earlier editions, as the inclusion of the word in the new title indicates.

As for the data on space travel itself, and on spaceships, they have also been greatly expanded when compared with the earlier editions. The prospects and difficulties of successful space flight are given a full detailing.

If anyone who owns *Rockets* (1944-1945) or *Rockets and Space Ships* (1947), the names under which the earlier editions of this book appeared, believes that he won't need the new vol-

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ume, I can only assure him that he is wrong. Great advances have been made since then, and much previously restricted information has been released.

THE SPIRIT WAS WILLING, by Milton Luban. Greenberg: Publisher, New York, 1951. 188 pages, $2.50.

THIS is a piece of machine-made, chromium - plated Thorne Smithiana, carefully cut along the pattern Thorne originated, and assembled together with real care. It is a complete Smith, even to the screwy courtroom scene. The only thing that is missing is Thorne Smith.

The tale tells about ghosts, very funny ghosts who get sued for alienation of affections—one by the name of Ahbed; one by the name of Terry Stone, who not so long before had jumped from the 14th floor of an apartment house when the girl's husband came home unexpectedly ("What made you jump?" "I forgot what floor we were on," the voice said sheepishly — that's the essential level of the humor in this volume); and a female ghost named Beryl Topaze, who creates earthquakes in people's apartments.

It's all quite cuckoo, but not, unfortunately, with that wonderful old jet-propelled cuckooism typical of Thorne Smith.

I did like the two unfortunate psychiatrists, though, Egghoff and Hophegg. Imagine trying to psychoanalyze a ghost!

It would be too bad if publishers didn't continue bringing out books like this, on the chance that one might make up for all the others. This doesn't happen to be the one. — GROFF CONKLIN

Coming Up . . .

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The startling conclusion of a tremendous novel by one of science fiction's greatest authors!

★ **SEA LEGS**.....by Frank Quattrocchi
Don't count on the dreams of a homesick space pilot! They are apt to turn into nightmares!

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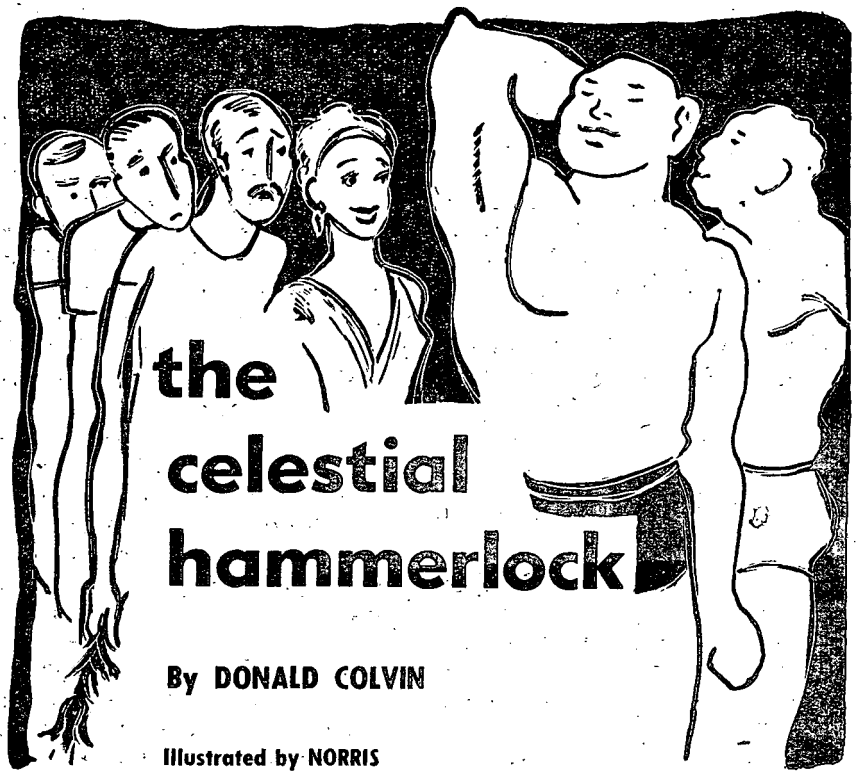

the celestial hammerlock

By DONALD COLVIN

Illustrated by NORRIS

SPACEGRAM

From: Jed Michaels, Ryttuk, Eros
To: H. E. Horrocks, Interplanetary Amusement Corp., Cosmopolis, Earth

I QUIT, YOU BALLOON BRAIN.

JED

* * *

ROCKET MAIL (Second Class)

Dear Michaels:
Your last message indicates you

This bigtime space promoter could get the Horsehead Nebula in a flying mare — but pinning a planetoid is tougher!

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wish to leave the employment of the Interplanetary Amusement Corp. Under our employee policy, this is allowable, effective upon completion of your current assignment. Under precedent set as long ago as 2347 A. D. the company will even pay the cost of your message of resignation.

However, the words "you balloon brain" do not seem a necessary part of that message and will be deducted from your salary.

Furthermore, I have a few words of my own to say. You march straight into my office, Michaels, just as soon as you get back from Eros. Eros? WHAT IN HELL ARE YOU DOING ON EROS?

Horrocks

* * *

ROCKET MAIL (First Class)

Mr. H. E. Horrocks
Dear Balloon Brain:

If you paid a little more attention to your office and less to that golf course on Venus, you'd know what I am doing on Eros. I got here two days ago via Mars with a herd of six wrestlers, in accordance with your own written memorandum. We were to appear at an Auruchs club smoker.

Upon arrival, I found that no preparations had been made for us and nobody knows anything about an Auruchs club.

The people here are nuts. They talk in six syllable words and their idea of a good time is to sniff flowers and do five dimensional calculus. They have less use for wrestlers than I have for you.

Michaels

* * *

ROCKET MAIL (Second Class)

Michaels, you nitwit:

That wasn't *Eros*, you idiot! You were supposed to go to *Erie* —Erie, Pa., right here on Earth!

If you remembered even your sixth grade Solar System history, you would know that the planetoid Eros was settled in 2141 by a group of longhairs headed by Prof. M. R. Snock, a philosopher with a dozen university degrees.

He wanted to show that war, crime and all forms of violence would disappear if people thought only beautiful thoughts.

The planetoid is lousy rich with erydnium ore and the people keep in luxury selling it to space freighters. They spend their time being gentle and thinking beautiful. There hasn't even been a spitball thrown there in eight generations.

A *fine* place for you to show up mahouting six wrestlers with no foreheads. You're lucky they haven't thrown you in jail.

Horrocks

* * *

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ROCKET MAIL (Postage Due)

Mr. H. E. Horrocks
Dear Jellyhead:

What do you mean lucky? We *are* in jail.

Right after we got here, the boys decided they had been cramped in that local spaceship and needed a workout to limber up. As soon as they got started, they were surrounded by a bunch of scrawny males, all sniffing hollyhocks.

Their spokesman, a bald bird with rosebuds in his whiskers, touched me with a gold-headed cane and said that apparently we were not yet attuned to the high mental plane of the planetoid, and would we mind going into protective custody while they worked over our egos and cured our kineticism.

I said suppose we wouldn't. He looked shocked and waved his flower and said that then, although it had never happened before, he supposed he would have to call the space patrol and have us thrown into the hoosegow on Ganymede.

I translated that into basic wrestler for the boys and we agreed we'd better go along. We'd heard about the jail those tough space patrol babies operate on Ganymede.

The flower lovers took us to an old erydnium pit and asked us to please go down. Now they're perfuming us every hour and feeding us flower bulbs to make us gentle.

We could climb out of this rathole whenever we wanted, but that would be climbing straight into a striped spacesuit.

I think about you all the time. And if you think they're beautiful thoughts, you're as crazy as I've always suspected.

Michaels

P.S. The boys asked that I enclose this note from them:
Dear Mr. Horox:

We do not like it here Mr. Horox. The Grub is no good. You come get us Plese Mr. Horox. Come soon.

Gorilla Man Thorpe
Choker Jonas
R. Z. Zbich, light-heavyweight champion of the Moon, Mercury and the inner rings of Saturn
Gorgeous Gordon
Barefoot Charles Anya
X, the Faceless Wonder

* * *

ROCKET MAIL (First Class)

Mr. Jed Michaels
Mr. Michaels:

Don't think you can sit around doing nothing and collect pay from the Interplanetary Amusement Corp. You're suspended until you get out of there.

Horrocks

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* * *

SPACEGRAM (Collect)

Mr. H. E. Horrocks, Cosmopolis, Earth

MY RESIGNATION IS A MISTAKE. I WITHDRAW IT. YOU ARE BEST OF ALL POSSIBLE BOSSES. IMPROBABLE AS IT SEEMS, I LOVE YOU.

JED

* * *

SPACEGRAM

Mr. Jed Michaels, Ryttuk, Eros

ONLY ONE POSSIBLE CAUSE FOR YOUR LAST SPACEGRAM. HAS SHE A SISTER?

HANK

* * *

ROCKET MAIL (Second Class)

Mr. H. E. Horrocks

My dear employer and pal:

Eros is a *wonderful* asteroid!

Toward the end of the second day in the pit, the wrestlers limbered up. Zbich and the Gorilla Man worked out on headlocks, Gorgeous Gordon did calisthenics, and Barefoot Charley, Choker Jonas and the Faceless Wonder got themselves into a grunting free-for-all.

After that got under way, I heard a squeal and a girl came bounding down the pit side. She was young and dark-haired and pretty. She might have been as intellectual as the president of Harvard above the shoulders, but what a framework she had to hold up that brain!

She went over to Gorgeous Gordon and she said, "Ooh!" With all the flower lovers around here, it was probably the first man with muscles she had ever seen.

The big ham swelled up. He flexed his arms and stuck out his chest. "OOH!" said the girl, and went bounding back up the side of the pit.

I stopped the exercise and the wrestlers sat and mused blankly at each other.

In a few minutes, our little visitor was back again. With her were about a dozen pals, differing in details, but resembling her in the important points.

The leader was a tall, brown-haired, gray-eyed girl, with a face where intellect fought a losing battle with a dimple. The others helped her down the pit side as if she were something fragile and precious, like maybe a new bottle of perfume.

Then our pal went back to Gorgeous Gordon. "More ooh!" said the girl guide.

You know how wrestlers are. They'll slap each other silly to get the cheers of four kids on a street corner, or commit mayhem for a purse big enough to buy a ham

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hock. In five seconds, we had going one of the finest wrestling matches in the history of good, clean sportsmanship. And over the cracking of wrestler's bones rose the shrieks of the girls, showing that their throats were in the right place, even if their brains weren't.

The gray-eyed girl sat with me on a flange of unmined ore. She was Aliana, a direct descendant of the leader of the Eros pioneers. As such, she was princess of the planetoid, although she left most of the governing to a council of elders, apparently as outstanding an array of mossbacks as ever smelled a gardenia or just plain smelled.

"I sometimes think, Mr. Michaels," Aliana told me, "that we of Eros have laid too much stress upon the cerebral. I wonder if our lives would not be fuller if we also included some of the more vigorous activities, such as the one in which those men are now engaged."

"If it's a vacation for your mind that you want, Princess," I agreed, "those boys are your meat."

Just then the Gorilla Man got a leg split on Barefoot Charley and began to braid his toes.

"How stimulating," breathed Aliana. "What is proper for the onlooker to remark in such a situation?"

"A satisfactory outcry, Princess," I explained, "is, 'Break it off!'"

"Break it off!" encouraged Aliana.

I had to wind it up, finally, before the wrestlers reduced themselves to blubber, thereby forcing the Interplanetary Amusement Corp. to go out and lasso itself another herd.

The girls went giggling up the side of the pit. At the top, Aliana waved at me. The others blew kisses, not caring much where they landed, as long as the receiver had muscles.

Next morning, a young man came into the pit. He announced that, upon Princes Aliana's orders, we were to have the freedom of Eros, so that contact with the planetoid culture could win us from our uncouth ways.

He was too young to be wholly gentled by the flowers and the council of elders. So the Choker showed him a wristlock. And when the Choker tossed him on his ear in the erydnium ore, he said words that were not beautiful. Maybe there's something to the people of this asteroid.

Anyway, everything is great now. We wander wherever we please, as long as we return to the pit to sleep. When nobody is looking, we sneak into the royal palace courtyard and put on a wrestling show for the girls.

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And the nights! Ah, the nights! Don't turn entirely green with envy, Hankus. At least leave your nose the familiar red.

Jed

* * *

SPACEGRAM

To: Jed Michaels, Ryttuk, Eros

FINE WORK. RETURN IMMEDIATELY. WILL MEET YOU AT MARS. MAYBE YOU CAN PERSUADE SOME OF THE GIRLS TO ACCOMPANY YOU THAT FAR. AM SENDING THE WRESTLERS TO SATURN.

HANK

* * *

ROCKET MAIL (First Class)

To: H. E. Horrocks, Cosmopolis, Earth

Dear Hank:

Go to Mars, the man says. I can't go anywhere. The elders caught us giving a rassle when Aliana was away and we're in again.

These flower roots taste terrible.

Jed

* * *

SPACEGRAM

To: Jed Michaels, Ryttuk, Eros.

YOU BLUNDERING BABOON, YOU'RE FIRED.

HORROCKS

* * *

ROCKET MAIL
(Free, Royal Frank)

Royal Palace, Eros

To: H. E. Horrocks, Cosmopolis, Earth

Dear melon brain:

I gather from your last message that you wish to discharge me. I accept the offer, fat boy. In fact, under royal Eros precedent, which I made up three minutes ago, we will even pay for your message. However, the words "you blundering baboon" do not seem a necessary part of that message, and their cost will be taken out of the first bit of business that the royal house of Eros decides to honor your puny little corporation with.

If any.

Times are changed, Hankus. I'm a big shot now.

A few hours after we got back in the pit, Aliana came back and sneaked down to see us. She said she thought it was about time to end this council of elders' nonsense and she asked our help.

I told her plan to the wrestlers in words of one syllable or less. They all agreed except the Faceless Wonder.

"I don't see why I should have nothing to do with no book," he said. It seems he had had a book once and chewed up the first three

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chapters before he found out it wasn't something to eat.

I signaled to the boys. Zbich clamped a headlock on him. The Choker got a hammerlock. The Gorilla Man took him in a scissors. Gorgeous Gordon got a toehold and Barefoot Charley stood by to jump on his stomach.

"Do you understand now?" I asked politely.

"Sure, Jed, sure," said the Faceless Wonder. "Why didn't ya explain it to me in the first place?"

So the next morning, we yelled for books. And for the following days, whenever anybody was around, we were busy sniffing flowers and reading. Between times, I tried to explain to the wrestlers why there weren't more pictures in the books.

A week later, we sprang the trap. I told the stablehand who brought us our fodder that I had taken in so much culture that I was breathing beauty. Zbich, gagging a little, asked for a second helping of flower roots. Gorgeous Gordon requested a needle and thread; he said he had fallen behind in his needlepoint.

A report of the conversation got to the council of elders and it brought them to the lip of the pit, looking like something the glue factory had refused to accept. Aliana was with them.

I bowed from the waist and made a speech. I thanked the elders for showing me the error of my ways. I said that, after staying in the lovely erydnium pit, I was enraptured with flowers, crazy about culture and practically engaged in five dimension calculus. I asked that I and the boys could have the priceless boon of walking freely around Eros, swapping beautiful thoughts with the local yokels.

The elders went into a deep state of flutter. Most of them were for accepting our proposition out of hand—which was bad. Our old pal with the beard saved us.

"But I saw these men romping," he shrilled. He lowered his voice to a high alto. "Positively romping!"

"Perhaps these men could prove their sincerity," Aliana said, winking at me. "Perhaps one of them would consent to illustrate what he has learned here by giving a public talk on some scientific subject."

"I should be glad," I answered, "to hack off a lecture for the good folk of Eros. Suppose I give it on anatomy."

And so it was decided.

Exactly as we had planned.

There was an amphitheater which the inhabitants of Eros had been using for ballets, string quartets and lectures by such of the longhairs as got stuffed so full of long words that they couldn't

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keep them to themselves. I had ringposts and ropes set up on the platform, saying I needed them to illustrate my talk. I got into the ring with Gorgeous Gordon and Zbich, who were dressed in trunks and bathrobes.

The wit and beauty of Eros was assembled there, the beauty being represented by the girls, and the wit—such as it was—by the council of elders. The rest of the seats were filled with other forms, some of them tolerably easy to look at.

I had picked out the subject of anatomy in the belief that none of the inhabitants of Eros knew anything about it.

The men didn't notice and the women had nothing at all to look at, anyway.

I went into my act.

"Kind hosts, friends and unfortunate incidents," I said. "My topic is the science of anatomy. Now, the science of anatomy is copacetic to the point of mopery. The cerebellum is distended and the duodenum goes into a state of e pluribus unum. Incalculably, thrombosis registers and the ectoplasm becomes elliptic. Or, in the vernacular, the eight ball in the side pocket."

The crowd sat stunned. Here and there, a flower sniffer looked down at his own rack of bones to check my statement.

"Let me illustrate," I said. I drew the bathrobes off the wrestlers.

The boys' muscles rippled as they strutted around the ring. From the women spectators came a long, deep sigh. From that moment, we had half the audience with us—the female half.

"In anatomy," I said, shaking my finger to emphasize the point, "the wingback shifts outward for a lateral. In the words of the great philosopher Hypocritus, the coil should always be kept clean between the barrel and the tap and all excess collar should be removed with a spatula."

Nobody was listening to me; they were looking at the wrestlers, which, of course, was what I'd figured on. Most of the men were comparing the grunters' muscles to their own, and here and there a few were dropping their flowers onto the floor.

I signaled and in a second the boys were an omelet of flying legs. The crowd gasped, then leaned forward intently. The shrieking began when Gordon got a headlock on Zbich. It grew when Zbich flipped Gorgeous with a flying mare. By the time Gordon got in a billygoat butt, the amphitheater sounded like feeding time at the zoo.

But there was another sound, too. Old Whiskers was tottering down the aisle, shrieking, "This

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is romping! Mere romping!"

I signaled and the boys stopped.

"We need a third man to illustrate the next point," I said. "Perhaps the gentleman in the aisle will volunteer."

Two wrestlers grabbed Old Whiskers and tossed him into the ring. Making fast double talk, I took off his shirt and he stood there, stripped to the waist, blinking in the sun and looking like a dehydrated squab.

The crowd noted the contrast between his scrawniness and the muscles of the wrestlers. A roar of laughter swept it.

"Perhaps," I said, "the gentleman would like to romp."

Zbich made a grab for him and he scuttled out of the ring, falling over the lower rope. A woman in the first row slugged him with a gardenia.

"Sit down, you old fool!" She turned to the wrestlers. "Break it off!" she shouted.

The match went on.

In my career, including my medicine show days, I've had lots of easy marks, but nothing to compare to the crowd at Eros' first wrestling match. When Gorgeous took the first fall with a body scissors, they went mad; when Zbich evened it up, they went hysterical; when Zbich took the deciding fall, they were delirious. And at the end of the match between Choker Jonas and the Faceless Wonder, they were reduced to a jelly. We had to call off the third match for fear we would have to take them home in jars.

At the end, we went in a body, led by the wrestlers, and threw the council of elders into the erydnium pit. We are keeping them now on a diet of raw meat.

The amphitheater has been converted into a permanent wrestling arena. We've laid out a football and a baseball field in the lyceum grove, and next week we'll start turning the botanical garden into a golf course.

To carry out the full program, we shall have to buy some equipment and hire some talent. Whether we toss some of the business to Interplanetary depends, Hankus boy, entirely on what attitude Interplanetary takes toward you know who.

When you write your crawling letter, you worm, address me as "Your Mightiness." I am minister of athletics on Eros now and the second most important person on the planetoid.

My work takes me close to the Princess Aliana. Very close.

Come to think of it, I wish there was a moon on Eros. It's not essential, but it helps.

So long, peasant.

JED
—DONALD COLVIN

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The Puppet Masters

PART 2 OF A 3-PART SERIAL

By ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

Illustrated by Don Sibley

SYNOPSIS

On July 7, 2007, three of us flew out to Iowa to investigate the landing of a Flying Saucer—me, the chief of the secret intelligence agency I work for, and another agent, a sultry redhead known to me only by her operation alias of "Mary Cavanaugh." The "Saucer" turned out to be a hoax, but six of our own people had preceded us and failed to come back.

A clue led us to Des Moines stereo station where we captured a strange, horrible parasite, killing its host, the station manager,

The one thing worse than fighting an enemy completely human or completely alien is — fighting one that is both!

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in so doing. It was our first sight of a "Puppet Master"—a repulsive blob of protoplasm which had fastened itself to the manager's back, controlling his nervous system, his will, his actions. We escaped with the captured parasite, but, without its host, it died.

By strict logical reconstruction the Old Man realized that Earth was being invaded by extraterrestrial parasites. He urged the President to quarantine Iowa and fight back, and was politely brushed off. It was our first defeat by an enemy almost impossible to fight—a man possessed by a parasite looked and acted like a normal man. Key people in Iowa were already possessed, but we could not prove it.

Mary and I dug into the files of the Congressional Library and came up with data which proved that the Saucers had been scouting this planet even before we achieved space flight. But we needed direct evidence. I got the Old Man to send me back to Iowa with two other agents and a portable pickup, to relay pictures back to the President. We found a nest of parasites and their victims at that same Des Moines stereo station and had to shoot our way out. We did not get pix, but we did capture another parasite; it fastened itself to one of my agents. We planned to keep it alive and show it to the President, but it managed to transfer to me.

I escaped from headquarters, fully conscious, but my will was my master's will; I was warmly content to serve him. I rented a loft, had a shipment of masters sent to me from Des Moines, and started recruiting new servants. In a short time we had the police force, stereo announcers, the mayor, local politicos, ministers —all the key people needed to bring New Brooklyn completely under our control, yet on the surface life went on as before.

I might still be serving my master had not the Old Man searched for me and slipped me a hypo as I was getting into an air taxi. After my rescue it took me some days to recuperate; I was half starved, covered with dirt and lice, and in a nervous state. When I was partly recovered the Old Man put me back on duty and took me to see an ape which was being used as host to the parasite captured with me. The sight of my master was almost too much for me. I wanted to kill it at once.

The Old Man explained soberly that he wanted me to submit again to being possessed by it so that he might interview it. I refused, spilling over with horror and indignation. He forced me to remain in the room while a volunteer was brought in to serve in

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my place. When they started strapping her into the chair that would restrain her during the interview, I realized that the victim was to be Mary! I blew my top and stopped them.

I let them strap me down, let them place that wet and pulsating thing on my bare shoulders—and then I was back with my master, and happy to be so. We avoided their questions skillfully at first, but the Old Man used an electrical shocking device which my master could not stand, and which almost tore me apart. He tried to force us to tell where we came from. Under the unbearable pain of the shocks, I collapsed.

When I came to, I was again human and unpossessed, but hating every human who had had anything to do with my ordeal. Mary was waiting for me in the corridor. She sobbed when she saw the shape I was in. I looked her over, called her a bitch, and slapped her, then stumbled back to my infirmary bed.

The Old Man came to see me when I was better and told me that the interview had been a success, even though the parasite had died without letting me talk. For unknown to me, they had been able to dig out of my brain, with hypnotic drugs, one key piece of information — the location of the home base of the parasites: Titan, moon of Saturn. Second, the Old Man said that I had no reason to be rough on Mary.

We had a head-on clash over this point; as I saw it, Mary had let herself be used as bait to force me to volunteer for a job so dirty, so soul-soiling, that I would never have touched it otherwise. But according to the Old Man she had been a true volunteer, a real hero, and had not had the slightest notion that he really wanted me for the interview. I'd proved I could live through it, while she might have died. He freely admitted tricking me, but swore that Mary was innocent.

I did not know what to believe.

XII

WHEN the doctor released me, I went looking for Mary. I still had only the Old Man's word, but I had more than a suspicion that I had made a big hairy sap of myself.

You would think that a tall, handsome redhead would be as easy to find as flat ground in Kansas. Field agents come and go, though, and the resident staff are encouraged to mind their own business. The personnel office gave me the bland brushoff. They referred me to Operations, meaning the Old Man. It was Mary I wanted, not him.

I met with even more suspicion

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when I tried the door tally; I began to feel like a spy in my own section.

I went to the bio lab, could not find its chief, and talked to an assistant. He did not know anything about a girl in connection with Project Interview; he went back to scratching himself and shuffling reports. I left and went to the Old Man's office. There seemed to be no choice.

A new face was at Miss Haines' desk. I never saw Miss Haines again, nor did I ask what had become of her; I did not want to know. The new secretary passed in my I. D. code, and, for a wonder, the Old Man was in and would see me.

"What do you want?" he asked grumpily.

I said, "Thought you might have some work for me," which was not at all what I had intended to say.

"Matter of fact, I was just fixing to send for you. You've loafed long enough." He barked something at his desk phone, stood up and said, "Come!"

I felt suddenly relaxed. "Cosmetics?"

"Your own ugly face will do. We're headed for Washington." Nevertheless we did stop in Cosmetics, but only for street clothes, a gun, and to have my phone checked.

The door guard made us bare our backs before he would let us approach and check out. We went on up, coming out in the lower levels of New Philadelphia. "I take it this burg is clean?" I said to the Old Man.

"If you do, you are rusty in the head," he answered. "Keep your eyes peeled."

The presence of so many fully clothed humans bothered me; I found myself drawing away and watching for round shoulders. Getting into a crowded elevator to go up to the launching platform seemed downright reckless. When we were in our car and the controls set, I said, "I could swear one cop we passed was wearing a hump."

"Possibly. Even probably."

"I thought you had this job taped and were fighting back on all fronts."

"What would you suggest?"

"Why, it's obvious—even if it were freezing cold, we ought not to see a back covered up anywhere, not until we know the parasites are all dead."

"That's right."

"Well, then—Look, the President knows the score, doesn't he?"

"He knows it."

"What's he waiting for? He should declare martial law and get action."

The Old Man stared down at the countryside. "It's time you learned the political facts of life.

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Congresses have refused to act in the face of obvious dangers. This one isn't obvious. The evidence is slim and hard to believe."

"But how about the Assistant Secretary of the Treasury? They can't ignore that."

"Can't they? The honorable gent is in Walter Reed with a nervous breakdown and can't recall what happened. The Treasury Department gave out that an attempt to assassinate the President had been foiled—true, but not the way they meant it."

"And the President held still for that?"

"There are men in both Houses who want his head on a platter. Party politics is a rough game."

"Good Lord, partisanship doesn't figure in a case like this!"

The Old Man cocked an eyebrow. "You think not, eh?"

I finally managed to ask him the question I had come into his office to ask: "Where is Mary?"

"Odd question from you," he grunted. I let it ride; he went on, "Where she should be. Guarding the President."

We went first to a closed session of a joint special committee. When we got there they were running stereos of my anthropoid friend, Napoleon—shots of him with the titan on his back, then closeups of the titan. One parasite looks like another, but I knew which one this was and I was deeply glad it was dead.

The ape gave way to me. I saw myself being clamped into the chair. I hate to admit how I looked; real funk is not pretty. I saw them lift the titan off the ape and onto my own bare back. Then I fainted in the picture—and almost fainted watching. I won't describe it; I can't.

But I saw the thing *die*. That was worth sitting through the rest.

The film ended and the chairman said, "Well, gentlemen?"

"Mr. Chairman!"

"The gentleman from Indiana is recognized."

"Speaking without prejudice to the issue, I have seen better trick photography from Hollywood."

The head of our bio lab testified, and then I found myself called to the stand. I gave my name, address, occupation, and perfunctorily was asked about my experiences under the titans. The questions were read from a sheet. From the floor, one Senator said to me, "Mr. Nivens—your name *is* Nivens?" I nodded. "You say that you are an investigator?"

"Yes."

"F. B. I., no doubt?"

"No, my chief reports directly to the President."

The Senator smiled. "*Just* as I thought. Now, Mr. Nivens, as a matter of fact you are an actor, are you not?"

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I wanted to say that I had once acted one season of summer stock, but that I was, nevertheless, a real, live, sure-enough investigator. The next thing I knew the clerk was saying, "Stand down, Mr. Nivens."

I sat tight. "Look here," I said. "It's evident that you think this is a put-up job. Well, for the love of heaven, bring in a lie detector! Or use the sleep test. This hearing is a joke."

The chairman banged his gavel. "Stand down, Mr. Nivens."

I stood.

The Old Man had told me that the purpose of the meeting was to report out a joint resolution declaring total emergency and vesting war powers in the President. We were ejected before the vote. I said to the Old Man, "It looks bad."

"Forget it," he said. "The President knew this gambit had failed when he heard the names of the committee."

"Where does that leave us? Do we wait for the slugs to take over Congress, too?"

"The President goes right ahead with a message to Congress requesting full powers."

"Will he get them?"

The Old Man simply scowled.

THE joint session was secret, but we were present—direct orders of the President. The Old Man and I were on that little balcony business back of the Speaker's rostrum. They opened with full rigamarole and then went through the ceremony of notifying the President. He came in at once, escorted by the delegation. His guards were with him, but they were all our men.

Mary was with him, too. Somebody set up a folding chair for her, right by the President. She fiddled with a notebook and handed papers to him, pretending to be a secretary. But the disguise ended there; she looked like Cleopatra on a warm night.

I caught her eye and she gave me a long, sweet smile. I grinned like a collie pup until the Old Man dug me in the ribs. Then I settled back and tried to behave.

The President made a reasoned explanation of the situation. It was as straightforward and rational as an engineering report, and about as moving. He put aside his notes at the end. "This is such a strange and terrible emergency, so totally beyond any previous experience, that I must ask broad powers to cope with it. In some areas, martial law must be declared. Because any citizen, no matter how respected or loyal, may be the unwilling servant of these secret enemies, all citizens must face some loss of rights and personal dignities until this plague is killed.

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"With utmost reluctance, I ask that you authorize these necessary steps." With that he sat down.

You can feel a crowd. They were uneasy, but he did not carry them. The President of the Senate looked at the Senate majority leader; it had been programmed for him to propose the resolution.

I don't know whether the floor leader shook his head or signaled, but he did not take the floor. Meanwhile the delay was awkward and there were cries of "Mister President!" and "Order!"

The Senate President passed over several others and gave the floor to a member of his party—Senator Gottlieb, a wheelhorse who would vote for his own lynching if it were on his party's program. He started out by yielding to none in his respect for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, and probably the Grand Canyon. He pointed modestly to his own long service and spoke well of America's place in history. I thought he was stalling while the boys worked out a new shift, when I suddenly realized that his words were adding up to meaning: he was proposing to suspend the order of business and get on with the impeachment and trial of the President of the United States!

I tumbled to it as quickly as anyone; the Senator had his proposal so decked out in ritualistic verbiage that it was hard to tell what he was saying. I looked at the Old Man.

The Old Man was looking at Mary.

She was looking back at him with an expression of extreme urgency.

The Old Man snatched a pad from his pocket, scrawled something, wadded it up, and threw it down to Mary. She caught it, read it, and passed it to the President.

He was sitting, relaxed and easy, as if one of his oldest friends were not tearing his name to shreds and, with it, the safety of the Republic. He read the note, then glanced unhurriedly around at the Old Man. The Old Man nodded.

The President nudged the Senate President, who banged his gavel. "If the Senator please!"

Gottlieb looked startled and said, "I do not yield."

"The Senator is not asked to yield. Because of the importance of what he is saying, the Senator is asked to come to the rostrum to speak."

Gottlieb was puzzled, but he walked slowly toward the front of the House. Mary's chair blocked the steps up to the rostrum. Instead of getting out of the way, she fumbled around, turning and picking up the chair, so that she got even more in the way. Gottlieb stopped and she

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brushed against him. He caught her arm, as much to steady himself as her. She spoke to him and he to her, but no one else could hear the words. Finally he went on to the front of the rostrum.

The Old Man was quivering like a dog in point. Mary looked up and nodded. The Old Man said, "Take him!"

I was over that rail in a flying leap and landed on Gottlieb's shoulders. I heard the Old Man shout, "Gloves, son! Gloves!" I did not stop for them. I split the Senator's jacket with my bare hands and I could see the slug pulsing under his shirt. I tore the shirt so anybody could see it.

Six stereo cameras could not have recorded what happened in the next few seconds. I slugged Gottlieb to stop his thrashing. Mary was sitting on his legs. The President was standing over me and shouting, "There! Now you can *all* see." The Senate President was standing stupefied, waggling his gavel. Congress was a mob, men yelling and women screaming. Above me the Old Man was shouting orders to the Presidential guards.

Between the guns of the guards and pounding of the gavel, some order was restored. The President started to talk. He told them that fortune had given them a chance to file past and see for themselves one of the titans from Saturn's largest moon. Without waiting for consent, he pointed to the front row and told them to come up.

Mary stayed on the platform. About twenty had filed by when I saw Mary signal the Old Man. This time I was a hair ahead of his order. I might have had quite a fight if two of the boys had not been close by, because this one was young and tough, an ex-marine. We laid him beside Gottlieb.

Then it was "inspection and search" whether they liked it or not. I patted the women on the back as they came by and caught one. I thought I had caught another, but it was an embarrassing mistake; it was just blubber fat. Mary spotted two more, and then there was a long stretch, three hundred or more, with no jackpots. It was evident that some were hanging back.

Eight men with guns were not enough—eleven, counting the Old Man, Mary and me. Most of the slugs would have gotten away if the Whip of the House had not organized help. With their assistance, we caught thirteen, ten alive. One of the hosts was badly wounded.

XIII

So the President got the authority and the Old Man was his *de facto* chief of staff; at last

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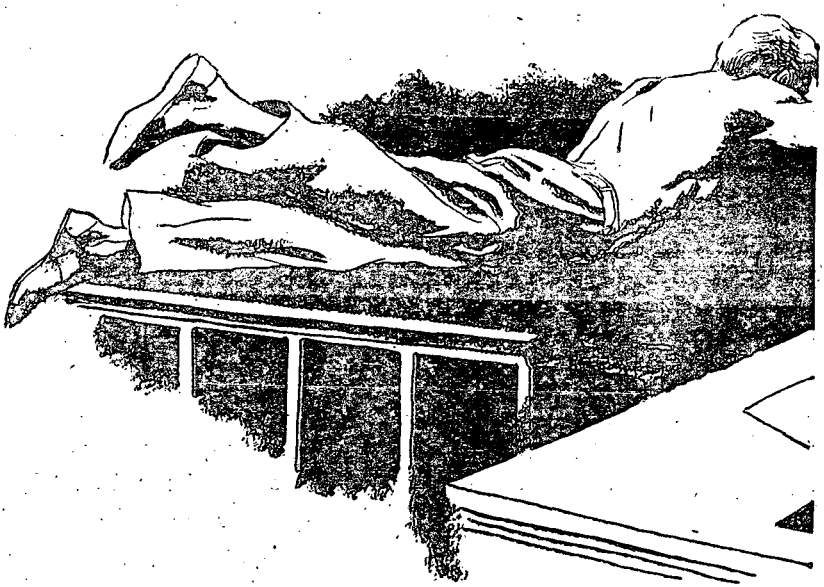
we could move. The Old Man had a simple campaign in mind. It could not be the quarantine he had proposed when the infection was limited to the Des Moines area. Before we could fight, we had to locate the enemy. Government agents couldn't search two hundred million people; the people had to do it themselves.

"Schedule Bareback" was to be the first phase of "Operation Parasite." The idea was that everybody was to peel to the waist and stay peeled, until all titans were spotted and killed. Women could have halter strings; a parasite could not hide under one.

We whipped up a display to go



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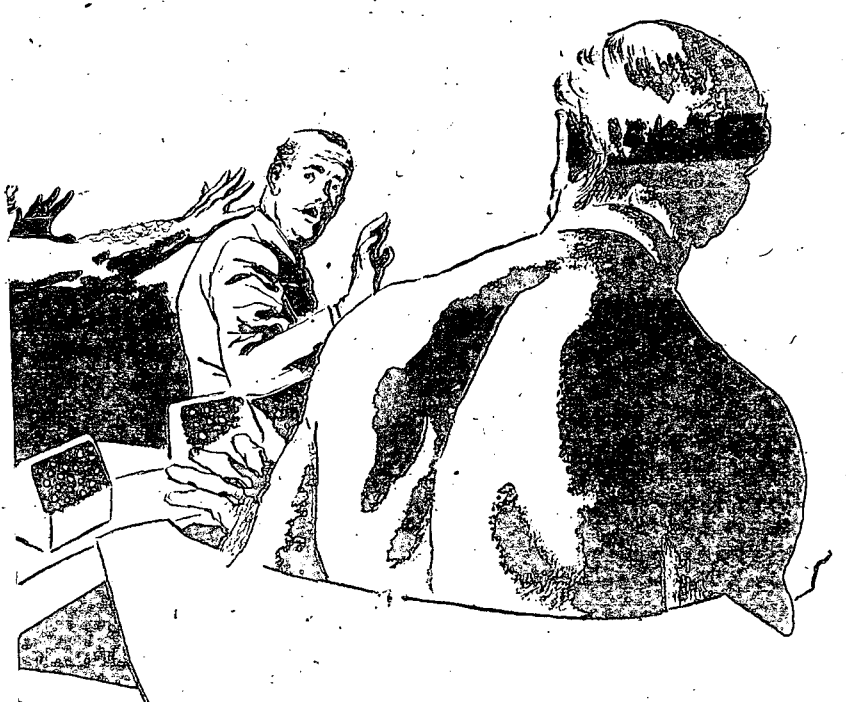
with the stereocast speech the President would make to the nation. Fast work had saved seven of the parasites we had flushed in the sacred halls of Congress; they were alive on animal hosts. We could show them and the less grisly parts of the film taken of me. The President himself would appear in shorts, and models would demonstrate what the Well Undressed Citizen Would Wear This Season, including the metal head-and-spine armor which was intended to protect a person even when asleep.

We got it ready in one black-coffee night. The smash finish was to show Congress in session, discussing the emergency, and every



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man, woman, and pageboy showing a bare back.

With twenty-eight minutes left until stereocast time, the President got a call from up the street. I was present; the Old Man had been with the President all night and had kept me around for chores. We were all in shorts; "Schedule Bareback" had already started in the White House. The President did not bother to cut us out of his end of the conversation.

"Speaking," he said. Presently he added, "You feel certain? Very well, John, what do you advise? . . . I see. No, I don't think that would work . . . I had better come up the street. Have them ready." He pushed back the phone and turned to an assistant. "Tell them to hold up the broadcast." He turned to the Old Man. "Come, we must go to the Capitol."

He sent for his valet and retired into a dressing room adjoining his office. When he came out, he was formally dressed for a state occasion. He offered no explanation. The rest of us stayed in our gooseflesh specials and so we went to the Capitol.

It was a joint session and I got that no-pants-in-church nightmare feeling, for the Congressmen and Senators were dressed as usual. Then I saw that the pageboys were in shorts without shirts and felt better.

Apparently some people would rather be dead than lose dignity, with Congress high on the list. They had given the President the authority he asked for; "Schedule Bareback" itself had been discussed and approved, but they did not see that it applied to them. After all, they had been searched and cleaned out. Maybe some saw holes in the argument, but not one wanted to be first in a public striptease. They sat tight, fully dressed.

When the President took the rostrum, he waited until he got dead silence. Then slowly, calmly, he started taking off clothes. He stopped when he was bare to the waist. He then turned around, lifting his arms. At last he spoke.

"I did that," he said, "so that you might see that your Chief Executive is not a prisoner of the enemy." He paused, punched a finger at the junior Whip. "Mark Cummings, are you a loyal citizen or are you a zombie spy? Get your shirt off!"

"Mister President—" It was Charity Evans, from the State of Maine, looking like a pretty schoolteacher. She stood and I saw that, while she was fully dressed, she was in evening dress. Her gown reached to the floor, but was cut as deep as could be above. She turned like a mannequin; in back the dress ended at the base of her spine. "Is this satisfactory

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attire, Mr. President?"

"Quite satisfactory, Madam."

Cummings was fumbling at his jacket; his face was scarlet. Someone stood up in the middle of the hall—Senator Gottlieb. He looked as if he should have been in bed. His cheeks were gray and sunken, his lips showed cyanosis, but he held himself erect and, with incredible dignity, followed the President's example. Then he, too, turned all the way around. On his back was the scarlet mark of the parasite.

He spoke. "Last night I stood here and said things I would rather have been flayed alive than utter. Last night I was not my own master. Today I am." Suddenly he had a gun in his hand. "Up on your feet! Two minutes to show a bare back or I shoot!"

Men close to him tried to grab his arm, but he swung the gun around like a fly-swatter, smashing one of them in the face. I had my own out, ready to back his play, but it was not necessary. They could see that he was as dangerous as an old bull. They started shucking clothes like Doukhobors.

One man bolted for a door; he was tripped. No, he was not wearing a parasite. But we did catch three. After that the show went on the channels ten minutes late and Congress started the first of its "bareback" sessions.

XIV

"LOCK your doors!"

"Close the dampers on your fireplaces!"

"Never enter a dark place!"

"Be wary of crowds!"

"A man wearing a coat is an enemy—shoot him!"

In addition to a steady barrage of propaganda, the country was being quartered and sectioned from the air, searching for Flying Saucers on the ground. Our radar screen was on full alert for unidentified blips. Military units, from airborne troops to guided-rocket stations, were ready to smear any that landed.

In the uncontaminated areas people took off their shirts, willingly or reluctantly, looked around them and found no parasites. They watched their newscasts and wondered and waited for the government to tell them that the danger was over. But nothing happened, and both laymen and local officials began to doubt the necessity of running around in sunbathing costumes.

The contaminated areas? The reports from there were *not materially different from the reports from other areas.*

Back in the days of radio it could not have happened; the Washington station where the 'cast originated could have blanketed the country. But stereo-video

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rides wave-lengths so short that horizon-to-horizon relay is necessary and local channels must be squirted out of local stations. It's the price we pay for plenty of channels and high-resolution pictures.

In the infected areas *the slugs* controlled the local stations; the people apparently never heard the warning.

But in Washington, we had every reason to believe that they *had* heard the warning. Reports came back from—well, Iowa, for example, just like those from California. The governor of Iowa was one of the first to send a message to the President, promising full cooperation. There was even a relayed stereo of him addressing his constituents, bare to the waist. He faced the camera and I wanted to tell him to turn around. Then they cut to another camera and we had a close up of a bare back, while the governor's voice continued. We listened to it in a conference room off the President's office. The President had kept the Old Man with him, I tagged along, and Mary was still on watch. Secretary of Security Martinez was there as well as the Supreme Chief of Staff, Air Marshal Rexton.

The President watched the 'cast and turned to the Old Man. "Well, Andrew? I thought Iowa was a place we would have to be sure to fence off."

The Old Man grunted. "Can't you folks see that the titans have won another round?"

"Eh?"

"You only heard the governor; they let us look at his back—or somebody's back. Did you notice that he didn't turn around in front of the camera?"

"But he did," someone said. "I saw him."

"I certainly had the impression that I saw him turn," said the President slowly. "You are suggesting that Governor Packer is himself possessed?"

"Correct. You saw what you were meant to see. There was a camera cut just before he was fully turned; people hardly ever notice them. Depend on it, Mister President; every message out of Iowa is faked."

The President looked thoughtful. Secretary Martinez said, "Impossible! Granted that the governor's message could have been faked—a clever character actor could have faked it. But we've had our choice of dozens of 'casts from Iowa. How about that street scene in Des Moines? Don't tell me that you can fake hundreds of people dashing around stripped to their waists. Or do your parasites practice mass hypnotis?"

"They can't that I know of," conceded the Old Man. "If they can, we might as well throw in the

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towel. But what made you think that 'cast came from Iowa?"

"Why, it came over the Iowa channel."

"It looked like any typical street in a downtown retail district. Never mind what city the announcer *told* you it was; what city *was* it?"

I've got fairly close to the "camera eye" that detectives are supposed to have. I let that picture run through my mind—and I not only could not tell what city, I could not even place the part of the country. It could have been Memphis, Seattle, or Boston, or none of them. Most downtown districts in American cities are as standardized as barber shops.

"You don't know," the Old Man went on. "I couldn't tell and I was looking for landmarks. The explanation is simple. The Des Moines station picked up a 'Schedule Bareback' street scene from some city not contaminated and rechanneled it under their own commentary. Gentlemen, the enemy knows us. This campaign has been planned in detail and they are ready to outwit us in almost any move we can make."

"Aren't you being an alarmist, Andrew?" said the President. "There is another possibility, that the titans have moved somewhere else."

"They are still in Iowa," the Old Man said flatly, "but you won't prove it with that thing." He gestured at the stereo tank.

Secretary Martinez squirmed. "This is ridiculous! You are saying that we can't get a correct report out of Iowa, as if it were occupied territory."

"That's what it is. Control the communications of a country and you control the country. You had better move fast, Mister Secretary, or you won't have any communications left."

"But I was merely—"

The Old Man said rudely, "I've told you they are in Iowa and in New Orleans, and a dozen other spots. My job is finished." He stood up and said, "Mister President, I've had a long pull for a man my age; when I lose sleep, I lose my temper. Could I be excused?"

"Certainly, Andrew." He had not lost his temper and I think the President knew it. He doesn't lose his temper; he makes other people lose theirs.

Secretary Martinez interrupted. "Wait a moment! You've made some flat statements. Let's check up." He turned to the Chief of Staff. "Rexton!"

"Yes, sir."

"That new post near Des Moines, Fort something-or-other, named after what's-his-name?"

"Fort Patton."

"That's it. Well, get them on the command circuit—"

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"With visual," put in the Old Man.

"With visual, of course, and we'll show this—I mean we'll get the true situation in Iowa."

The Air Marshal handed a by-your-leave-sir to the President, went to the stereo tank and patched in with Security General Headquarters. He asked for the officer of the watch at Fort Patton, Iowa.

The tank showed the inside of a communications center. Filling the foreground was a young officer. His rank and corps showed on his cap, but his chest was bare. Martinez turned triumphantly to the Old Man.

"You see?"

"I see."

"Now to make certain. Lieutenant!"

"Yes, sir!" The young fellow looked awestruck and kept glancing from one famous face to another. Reception and bi-angle were in sync; the eyes of the image looked where they seemed to look.

"Stand up and turn around," Martinez continued.

"Uh? Why, certainly, sir." He seemed puzzled, but did so, and it took him almost out of scan. We could see his bare back up to the short ribs—no higher.

"Confound it!" shouted Martinez. "*Sit down* and turn around."

"Yes, sir!" The youth seemed flustered. He added, "Just a moment while I widen the view angle, sir."

The picture melted and rippling rainbows chased across the tank. The young officer's voice was still coming over the audio channel. "There, is that better, sir?"

"Damn it, we can't see a thing!"

"You can't? Just a moment, sir."

Suddenly the tank came to life and I thought for a moment that we were back at Fort Patton. But it was a major in the screen this time and the place looked larger. "Supreme Headquarters," the image announced. "Communications officer of the watch, Major Donovan."

"Major," Martinez said in controlled tones, "I was hooked in with Fort Patton. What happened?"

"Yes, sir; I was monitoring it. We've had a slight technical difficulty. We'll put your call through again in a moment."

"Well, hurry!"

The Old Man stood up. "Call me when you've cleared up that 'slight technical difficulty.' I'm going to bed."

XV

IF I have given the impression that Secretary Martinez was stupid, I am sorry. Everyone had trouble at first believing what the

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slugs could do, including me. There were no flies on Marshal Rexton, either. The two worked all night, after convincing themselves by more calls to known danger spots that "technical interruptions" do not occur so conveniently. They called the Old Man about four A.M. and he called me.

They were in the same room, Martinez, Rexton, a couple of his brass, and the Old Man. The President came in, wearing a bathrobe and followed by Mary, as I arrived. Martinez started to speak but the Old Man cut in. "Let's see your back, Tom!"

Mary signaled that everything was okay, but the Old Man chose not to see her. "I mean it," he persisted.

The President said quietly, "Perfectly correct, Andrew," and slipped his robe off his shoulders. His back was clean. "If I don't set an example, how can I expect others to cooperate?"

Martinez and Rexton had been shoving pins into a map, red for bad, green for good, and a few amber ones for doubtful. Iowa looked like measles; New Orleans and the Teche country were no better. So was Kansas City. The upper end of the Missouri-Mississippi system, from Minneapolis and St. Paul down to St. Louis, was clearly enemy territory. There were fewer red pins from there down to New Orleans—but no green ones. There was a hot spot around El Paso and two on the East Coast.

The President looked it over. "We shall need the help of Canada and Mexico," he said. "Any reports?"

"None that mean anything, sir."

"Canada and Mexico," the Old Man said seriously, "will be just a start. You are going to need the whole world."

The President drew a finger across the map. "Any trouble getting messages to the West Coast?"

"Apparently not, sir," Rexton told him. "The parasites don't seem to interfere with straight-through relay. But all military communications I have shifted to relay through the space stations." He glanced at his watch finger. "Station Gamma, at the moment."

"Hmmm—" said the President, worried. "Andrew, could these things storm a space station?"

"How would I know?" the Old Man answered testily. "I don't know whether their ships are built for it or not. More probably they would do it by infiltration, through the supply rockets."

"Don't worry about it," Rexton said. "The costume we are wearing is customary in a station. A man fully dressed would stand

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out like an overcoat on the beach. But we'll see." He gave orders to an assistant.

The President resumed studying the map. "So far as we know," he said, pointing to Grinnell, Iowa, "all this derives from a single landing, here."

The Old Man answered, "So far as we know."

I said, "Oh, no!" They all looked at me. "There were at least three more landings — I *know* there were—before I was rescued."

The Old Man looked dumbfounded. "Are you sure, son? We thought we had wrung you dry."

"Of course I'm sure."

"Why didn't you mention it?"

I tried to explain how it feels to be possessed, how you know what is going on, but everything seems dreamy, equally important and unimportant. I grew quite upset. I am not the jittery type, but being ridden by a master does something to you.

The Old Man said, "Steady down, son," and the President gave me a reassuring smile.

Rexton said, "The point is: where did they land? We might still capture a ship."

"I doubt it," the Old Man answered. "They did a cover-up on the first one in a matter of hours. If it was the first," he added thoughtfully.

I went to the map and tried to think. Sweating, I pointed to New Orleans. "I'm pretty sure one was about here. I don't know where the others landed."

"How about here?" Rexton asked, pointing to the East Coast.

"I don't know."

"Can't you remember anything else?" Martinez demanded, annoyed. "Think, man!"

I thought until my skull ached, then pointed to Kansas City. "I sent several messages here, but I don't know whether they were shipment orders or not."

Rexton looked at the map. "We'll assume a landing near Kansas City. The technical boys can do a problem on it. It may be subject to logistic analysis; we might derive the other landing."

"Or landings," added the Old Man.

XVI

HINDSIGHT is confoundedly futile. At the moment the first Saucer landed, the menace could have been stamped out by one bomb. At the time Mary, the Old Man and I reconnoitered around Grinnell, we three alone might have killed every slug, had we known where they all were. Had "Schedule Bareback" been ordered during the first week, it alone might have turned the trick.

But it was quickly clear that

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"Schedule Bareback" had failed as an offensive measure. As a defense it was useful. The uncontaminated areas could be kept so. Areas contaminated but not "scoured" were cleaned up — Washington itself, and New Philadelphia. New Brooklyn, too —there I had been able to give specific advice. The entire East Coast turned from speckled to solid green.

But as the middle of the country filled in on the map, it filled in red. The infected areas stood out in ruby light now, for the wall map studded with pins had been replaced by a huge electronic military map, ten miles to the inch, covering one wall of the conference room. It was a repeater map, the master being down in the New Pentagon.

The country was split in two, as if a giant had washed red pigment down the central valley. Two amber paths bordered the band held by the slugs; these were the only areas of real activity, places where line-of-sight reception was possible both from stations held by the enemy and from stations still in the hands of free men. One started near Minneapolis, swung west of Chicago and east of St. Louis, then meandered through Tennessee and Alabama to the Gulf. The other cut a path through the Great Plains and came out near Corpus Christi. El Paso was the center of a ruby area unconnected with the main body.

I wondered what was going on in those border strips. I was alone; the Cabinet was meeting and the President had taken the Old Man with him. Rexton and his brass had left earlier. I stayed because I hesitated to wander around in the White House, so I fretted and watched amber lights blink red and, much less frequently, red lights blink amber or green.

I wondered how a visitor with no status managed to get breakfast. I had been up since four and so far I had had one cup of coffee, served by the President's valet. Even more urgently, I wanted to find a washroom. At last I got desperate enough to try doors. The first two were locked; the third was what I wanted. It was not marked "Sacred to the Chief" so I used it.

When I came back, Mary was in the map room.

I looked at her stupidly. "I thought you were with the President."

She smiled. "I got chased out. The Old Man took over."

"Mary, I've been wanting to talk with you and this is the first chance I've had. I guess— Well, anyway, I shouldn't have — I mean, according to the Old Man—" I stopped, my carefully

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rehearsed speech in ruins. "I houldn't have said what I did," I concluded miserably.

She put a hand on my arm. "What you said and what you did were fair enough on the basis of what you knew. The important hing, *to me,* is what you did *for ne.* The rest does not matter—xcept that I am happy again to now that you don't despise me."

"Damn it, don't be so noble!"

She gave me a merry smile, not at all like the gentle one with which she had greeted me. "Sam, I think you *like* your women to be a bit bitchy. I warn you, I can be." She went on, "You are still worried about that slap, too. All right, I'll pay it back." She reached up and patted me gently on the cheek. "There, it's paid and you can forget it."

Her expression suddenly changed, she swung on me, and I thought my head had been taken off. "And that," she said, "pays back the one I got from your girl friend!"

I raised a hand and she tensed —but I just wanted to touch my stinging cheek. "She's not my girl friend," I said lamely.

We eyed each other and simultaneously burst out laughing. She put her hands on my shoulders and let her head collapse on my right one, still laughing. "Sam," she managed to say, "I'm so sorry. I shouldn't have done it. At least I shouldn't have slapped you so hard."

"The devil you're sorry," I growled, "but you didn't have to have put english on it. You damn near took the hide off."

"Poor Sam!" She touched it; it hurt. "She's really not your girl friend?"

"No, but not because I didn't try."

"I'm sure it wasn't. Who is your girl friend, Sam?"

"You are, you vixen!"

"Yes," she said comfortably, "I am—if you'll have me. I told you that before. Bought and paid for."

She was waiting to be kissed; I pushed her away. "Go to hell. I don't want you bought and paid for."

"I put it badly. Paid for, but not bought. I'm here because I want to be. Now will you kiss me, please?"

I felt myself sinking into a warm golden haze and I did not ever want to come up. Finally I had to break and gasp, "I think I'll sit down for a minute."

She said, "Thank you, Sam," and let me.

"MARY," I said presently, "there is something I am hoping you possibly could do for me."

"Yes?" she asked eagerly.

"Tell me how in the name of

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Ned a person gets breakfast around here. I'm starved."

She looked startled, but she answered, "Why, certainly!"

I don't know how she did it; she may have butted into the White House pantry and helped herself, but she returned in a few minutes with sandwiches and two bottles of beer. I was cleaning up my third corned beef on rye when I said, "Mary, how long do you figure that meeting will last?"

"Oh, I'd give it a minimum of two hours. Why?"

"In that case," I said, swallowing the last bite, "we have time to duck out, find a registry office, get married and return before the Old Man misses us."

She did not answer. Instead she stared at the bubbles in her beer. "Well?" I insisted.

She raised her eyes. "I'll do it if you say so."

"You don't want to marry me?"

"Don't be angry, darling. You don't know me yet. Get acquainted with me; you might change your mind."

"I'm not in the habit of changing my mind."

She glanced up, then looked away sadly. I felt my face get hot. "That was a very special circumstance," I protested. "It could not happen to us again in a hundred years. That wasn't me talking; it was—"

She stopped me. "I know, Sam. But you don't have to prove anything. I won't run out on you and I didn't mistrust you. Take me away on a weekend; better yet, move into my apartment. If I wear well, there's always time to make me what great-grandmother called an 'honest woman,' heaven knows why."

I must have looked sullen. She put a hand on mine and said seriously, "Look at the map, Sam."

I turned my head. Red as ever, or more so — the danger zone around El Paso had increased. She went on, "Let's get this cleaned up first, dear. Then, if you still want to, ask me again. In the meantime, you can have the privileges without the responsibilities."

What could be fairer than that? The trouble was it was not the way I wanted it. Why will a man who has been avoiding marriage like the plague suddenly decide that nothing less will suit him?

WHEN the meeting was over, the Old Man collared me and took me for a walk. Yes, a walk, though we went only as far as the Baruch Memorial Bench. There he sat down, fiddled with his pipe, and scowled. The day was as muggy as only Washington can get; the park was almost deserted.

He said, "'Schedule Counter

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Blast' starts at midnight. We swoop down on every relay station, broadcast station, newspaper office, and Western Union office in 'Zone Red'."

"Sounds good," I answered. "How many men?"

He did not answer. "I don't like it."

"Huh?"

"The President went on channels and told everybody to peel off their shirts. We find that the message did not reach infected territory. What's the next development?"

I shrugged. " 'Schedule Counter Blast,' I suppose."

"That hasn't happened yet. Think—it has been more than twenty-four hours. What should have happened and hasn't?"

"Should I know?"

"You should, if you are ever going to amount to anything on your own. Here." He handed me a combo key. "Scoot out to Kansas City and take a look-see. Stay away from comm stations, cops, and—stay away from *them*. Look at everything else. And don't get caught. Be back here a half hour before midnight. Get going."

"A lot of time you allow to case a whole city," I complained. "It will take three hours just to drive to Kansas City."

"More than three hours," he answered. "Don't attract attention by getting a ticket. Move."

So I moved. The combo was to the car we had come down in; I picked it up at Rock Creek Park platform. Traffic was light and I commented on it to the despatcher. "Freight and commercial carriers are grounded," he answered. "The emergency. You got a military clearance?"

I could get one by phoning the Old Man, but bothering him about trivial things does not endear one to him. I said, "Check the combo."

He shrugged and slipped it in his machine. My hunch had been right; his eyebrows shot up. "Boy, you rate!" he commented. "You must be the President's caddy!"

Once launched, I set the controls for Kansas City at legal max and tried to think. The transponder beeped as radar beams hit it each time I slid from one control block into the next, but no faces appeared on the screen. Apparently the Old Man's combo was good for the route, emergency or not. I began to wonder what would happen when I slipped over into the red areas—and then realized what he had meant by "the next development."

One tends to think of communications as meaning line-of-sight channels and nothing else. But "communications" means *all* traffic, even dear old Aunt Mamie, headed for California and stuffed

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with gossip. The slugs had seized the channels, but news can't be stopped that easily; such measures merely slow it down. Ergo, if the slugs expected to retain control where they were, seizing the channels would be just their first step.

What would they do next? They would do something and I, being a part of "communications" by definition, had better be prepared for evasive action if I wanted to save my pink skin. The Mississippi River and Zone Red were sliding closer by the minute. I wondered what would happen the first time my recognition signal was picked up by a station controlled by masters.

I judged that I was probably safe in the air, but that I had better not let them spot me landing. Elementary.

"Elementary" in the face of a traffic control net which was described as the No-Sparrow-Shall-Fall plan. The traffic men boasted that a butterfly could not make a forced landing anywhere in the United States without alerting the search & rescue system. Not quite true—but I was no butterfly.

On foot I will make a stab at penetrating any security screen, mechanical, manned, electronic, or mixed. But how can you use misdirection in a car making westing a full degree every seven minutes? Or hang a stupid, innocent look on the nose of a duo? If I went in on foot, the Old Man would get his report come next Michaelmas; he wanted it before midnight.

Once, in a rare mellow mood, the Old Man told me that he did not bother agents with detailed instructions. Give a man a mission; let him sink or swim. I said his method must use up a lot of agents.

"Some," he had admitted, "but not as many as the other way. I believe in the individual and I try to pick those who are survivor types."

"And how in hell," I had asked, "do you pick a 'survivor type'?"

He had grinned wickedly. "A survivor type is one who comes back."

So I was about to find out which type I was—and damn his icy heart!

MY course would take me toward St. Louis, swing me around the city loop, and on to Kansas City. But St. Louis was in Zone Red. The map had shown Chicago as green; the amber line had zigzagged west somewhere above Hannibal, Missouri—and I wanted very badly to cross the Mississippi while still in Zone Green. A car crossing that mile-wide river would make a radar blip as sharp as a desert star.

I signaled block control for per-

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mission to descend to local-traffic level, then did so without waiting, resuming manual control and cutting my speed. I headed north.

Short of the Springfield loop I headed west, staying low. When I reached the river I crossed slowly, close to the water, with my transponder shut down. Sure, you can't shut off your radar recognition signal in the air—but I had hopes, if local traffics were being monitored while I crossed, that my blip would be mistaken for a boat on the river.

I did not know certainly whether the next block control station across the river was Zone Red or Zone Green. I was about to cut in the transponder again, on the assumption that it would be safer to get back into the traffic system, when I noticed the shoreline opening up ahead. The map did not show a tributary; I judged it to be an inlet, or a new channel not yet mapped. I dropped almost to water level and headed into it. The stream was narrow, meandering, almost overhung by trees, and I had no more business taking a sky car into it than a bee has of flying down a trombone. But it afforded perfect radar "shadow;" I could get lost in it.

In a few minutes I *was* lost—lost myself, right off the map. The channel switched and turned and cut back and I was so busy bucking the car by hand that I lost all track of navigation. I swore and wished that the car were a triphib so that I could land on water. The trees suddenly broke; I saw a stretch of level land, kicked her over and squatted her in with a deceleration that nearly cut me in two against my safety belt. But I was down and no longer trying to play catfish in a muddy stream.

I wondered what to do. No doubt there was a highway close by. I had better find it and stay on the ground. That was silly—there was no time for ground travel; I *must* get back into the air. But I did not dare until I knew positively whether traffic here was being controlled by free men or by slugs.

I had not turned on the stereo since leaving Washington. Now I did so, hunting for a newscast, but not finding one. I got (a) a lecture by Myrtle Doolightly, Ph. D., on *Why Husbands Grow Bored,* sponsored by the Uth-a-gen Hormone Company; (b) a trio of girl hepsters singing *If You Mean What I Think You Mean, What Are We Waiting For?* (c) an episode in *Lucretia Learns About Life.*

Dear Doctor Myrtle was fully dressed. The trio were dressed the way one would expect, but they did not turn their backs to the camera. Lucretia alternated hav-

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ing her clothes torn off with taking them off willingly, but the camera always cut or the lights went out just before I could see if her back was bare—of slugs, that is.

And none of it meant anything. Those programs could have been taped months before the President announced "Schedule bareback." I was still switching channels, trying to find a newscast, when I found myself staring into the unctuous smile of an announcer. He was fully dressed.

It was one of those giveaway shows. He was saying: "—and some very lucky little woman sitting by her screen right this minute is about to receive, absolutely free, a General Atomics Six-in-One Automatic Home Butler. Will it be you? You? Or lucky *you?*" He turned away from scan; I could see his shoulders. They were covered by a jacket and distinctly rounded, almost humped. I was inside Zone Red.

SWITCHING off, I realized that I was being watched by a male about nine years old. He

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was wearing only shorts—at his age that's standard style. I threw back the wind screen. "Hey, bub, where's the highway?"

He answered, "Road to Macon's up yonder. Say, mister, that's a Cadillac Zipper, ain't it?"

"Sure thing. Where yonder?"

"Give me a ride, huh, will you?"

I shrugged. While he climbed in, I opened my kit, got out shirt, trousers, and jacket. I said, "Maybe I shouldn't put these on. Do people around here wear shirts?"

He scowled. "Of course they do. Where do you think you are—in Arkansas?" I asked again about the road. He said, "Can I punch the button when we take off, huh?"

I explained that we were going to stay on the ground. He was annoyed but condescended to point a direction. I drove cautiously as the car was heavy for unpaved countryside. Presently he said to turn.

Quite a bit later, I stopped and said, "Are you going to show me that road, or am I going to wallop you?" He opened the door and slid out. "Hey!" I yelled.

He looked back. "Over that way," he jeered. I turned the car, not expecting to find a highway, but it was only fifty yards away. The brat had caused me to drive around three sides of a square so he'd get a longer ride.

If you could call it a highway—there was not an ounce of rubber in the paving. Still, it was a road; I followed it to the west. All in all, I had wasted an hour.

Macon, Missouri, seemed too normal to be reassuring; "Schedule Bareback" obviously had not been heard of. I gave serious thought to checking this town, then beating back the way I had come, while I could. Pushing farther into country which I knew to be controlled by the masters made me jittery; I wanted to run.

But the Old Man had said Kansas City. I drove the belt around Macon and pulled into a landing flat on the west. There I queued up for local traffic launching and headed for Kansas City in a mess of farmers' copters and local craft. I would have to hold local speeds across the state, but that was safer than getting into the hot pattern with my transponder identifying my car to every block control. The field was automatically serviced; it seemed probable that I had managed to enter the Missouri traffic pattern without arousing suspicion.

XVII

KANSAS City was not hurt in the bombings, except on the east, where Independence used to

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be. Consequently it never had to be rebuilt. From the southeast you can drive as far as Swope Park before having to choose between parking or paying toll to enter the city proper. Or you can fly in and make another choice: land in the landing flats north of the river and take the tunnels into the city, or land on the downtown platforms south of Memorial Hill.

I decided not to fly in; I did not want to have to pick the car up through a checking system. I do not like tunnels in a pinch, nor launching platform elevators. A man can easily be trapped in them.

Frankly, I did not want to go into the city at all.

I roaded the car on Route 40 and drove into the Meyer Boulevard toll gate. The line waiting was quite long; I began to feel hemmed in as soon as another car filled in behind me. But the gatekeeper took my toll without glancing at me. I glanced at him, all right, but could not tell whether or not he was being ridden.

I drove through the gate—only to be stopped just beyond. A barrier dropped in front of me and I barely managed to stop the car, whereupon a cop stuck his head in.

"Safety check," he said. "Climb out." I protested. "The city is having a safety drive," he explained. "Here's your car check. Pick it up on the other side of the barrier. Get out and go in that door."

He pointed to a building near the curb.

"What for?"

"Eyesight and reflexes. You're holding up the line."

In my mind's eye I saw the map with Kansas City glowing red. That the city was "secured" I was sure; therefore this mild-mannered policeman was almost surely hag-ridden. But short of shooting him and making an emergency takeoff, there was nothing to do but comply. I got out grumbling and walked slowly toward the building. It was a temporary job with an old-style unpowered door. I pushed it open with a toe and glanced both sides and up before I entered. There was an empty anteroom with door beyond.

Someone inside called, "Come in."

There were two men in white coats, one with a doctor's reflector strapped to his head. He said briskly, "This won't take a minute. Step over here." He closed the door I had entered; I heard the lock click.

It was a sweeter setup than we had worked out for the Constitution Club. Spread out on a table were transit cells for masters, al-

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ready opened and warmed. The second man had one ready—for me, I knew—and was holding it toward him, so that I could not see the slug. The transit cells would not arouse alarm in the victims; the medical men always have odd things at hand.

As for the test, I was being invited to place my eyes against the goggles of an ordinary visual acuity tester. The "doctor" would keep me there, blindfolded without knowing it and reading test figures, while his "assistant" fitted me with a master. No violence, no slips, no protests.

It was not necessary, as I had learned during my own "service," to bare the victim's back. Just touch the master to the neck, then let the recruit himself adjust his clothing to cover his master.

"Over here," the "doctor" repeated. "Place your eyes against the eyepieces."

I went to the bench on which was mounted the acuity tester. Then I turned suddenly around.

The assistant had moved in, the cell ready in his hands. As I turned he tilted it away from me.

"Doctor," I said, "I wear contact lenses. Should I take them off first?"

"No, no," he snapped. "Let's not waste time."

"But, Doctor," I protested, "I want you to see how they fit. I've had a little trouble with the left one." I lifted both hands and pulled back the lids of my left eye. "See?"

He said angrily, "This is not a clinic. Now, if you please—" They were both in reach; moving quickly, I snapped my arms out and grabbed at the spot between each set of shoulderblades. With each hand I struck something soft under the coats and felt revulsion clutch me.

Once I saw a cat struck by a ground car; the poor thing sprang straight up with its back arched the wrong way and all limbs flying. These two unlucky men did the same thing. They contorted every muscle in a grand spasm. I could not hold them; they jerked out of my arms and flopped to the floor. But there was no need to hang on. After that first convulsion they went limp.

Someone was knocking. I called out, "Just a moment. The doctor is busy." It stopped. I made sure the door was locked, then bent over the "doctor" and pulled up his coat to see what I had done to his master.

The thing was a ruptured mess. So was the one on the other man, which pleased me heartily. I had determined to burn the slugs with my gun if they were not already dead, and I was not sure that I could do so without killing the hosts. I left the men to live or die

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—or be seized again by titans. I had no way to help them.

The masters waiting in their cells were another matter. With a fan beam and max charge, I burned them all. There were two large crates against the wall; I beamed them also until the wood charred.

The knocking resumed. I looked around hastily for somewhere to hide the two men, but there was nowhere, so I decided to run for it. As I was about to go out the exit, I felt that something was missing. I looked around again.

There seemed to be nothing suited to my purpose. I could use clothing from the "doctor" or his helper, but I did not want to. Then I noticed the dust cover for the acuity tester. I loosened my jacket, snatched up the cover, wadded it and stuffed it under my shirt between my shoulders. With my jacket zipped, it made a bulge of about the proper size.

Then I went out, feeling pretty cocky.

Another cop took my car check. He glanced sharply at me, then motioned me to climb in. I did and he said, "Go to police headquarters, under the City Hall."

"Police headquarters, City Hall," I repeated and gunned her ahead. I started in that direction and turned onto Nichols Freeway. I came to a stretch where traffic thinned out, and punched the button to shift license plates. It seemed possible that there was already a call out for the plates I had been showing at the gate. I wished that I had been able to change the car's colors as well.

Before the Freeway reached Mcgee Traffic Way, I turned down a ramp and stuck thereafter to sidestreets. It was eighteen hundred, Zone Six time, and I was due in Washington in four and one-half hours.

XVIII

THE city did not have the right flavor, as if it were a clumsily directed play. I tried to put my finger on the fault; it slipped away.

Kansas City has many neighborhoods made up of family units a century old or more. Kids roll on lawns and householders sit on their front porches, just as their great-grandparents did. If there are bomb shelters around, they do not show. The queer, old, bulky houses, put together by guildsmen long since dead, make those neighborhoods feel like enclaves of security. I cruised through along streets, dodging dogs, rubber balls and toddlers, and tried to get the feel of the place. It was the slack of the day, time for a drink, for watering lawns, for neighborly chatting. I saw a woman bending over a flower bed.

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She was wearing a sunsuit and her back was bare; clearly she was not wearing a master, nor were the two kids with her. What could be wrong?

It was a very hot day; I began to look for sunsuited women and men in shorts. Kansas City is in the Bible Belt, so I found people dressed both ways—but the proportions were wrong. Sure, there were plenty of kids dressed for the weather, but in several miles of driving I saw the bare backs of only five women and two men.

I should have seen more like five-hundred.

Cipher it out. While some jackets undoubtedly did *not* cover masters, by simple proportion *well over ninety per cent of the population must be possessed.*

The masters did not simply hold key points and key officials; the masters *were* the city.

I felt a blind urge to blast off and streak out of Zone Red at emergency maximum. Knowing that I had escaped the gate trap, they would be looking for me. I might be the only free man driving a car in the entire city—and they were all around me!

I fought it down. An agent who turns panicky is not likely to get out of a tight spot. But it was hard to be calm.

I must be wrong; there could not possibly be enough masters to saturate a city with a million population. I remembered my own experiences, recalling how we picked our recruits and made each new host count. Of course that had been a secondary invasion depending on shipments, whereas Kansas City almost certainly had had a Saucer land nearby. Still it did not make sense; it would take a dozen or more to carry enough masters to saturate Kansas City. If there had been that many, surely the space stations would have radar-tracked their landing orbits.

Could it be that they had no trajectories to track? We did not know what the masters were capable of in engineering and it was not safe to judge their limitations by our own.

But the data I had led to a conclusion which contradicted common logic; therefore I must check before I reported. One thing seemed sure: even if the masters had almost saturated this city, they were still keeping up the masquerade, permitting the city to look like a city of free human beings. Perhaps I was not as conspicuous as I feared.

I moseyed along another mile or so, going nowhere. Finding myself heading into the retail district around the Plaza, I swung away. Where there are crowds, there are cops, and the masters make a special point of possessing police forces. I passed a public swim-

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ming pool, noticed it, and was several blocks away before I realized it had carried a sign—CLOSED FOR THE SEASON.

Item: a trap at the city's toll gates; item: too few sunsuits; item: a swimming pool closed in the hottest part of the summer.

Conclusion: the slugs were incredibly more numerous than anyone had dreamed.

Corollary: "Schedule Counterblast" was based on a mistaken estimate; it would work as well as hunting rhinoceri with a slingshot.

Counter argument: I could hear Secretary Martinez' polite sarcasm tearing my report to shreds. I needed proof strong enough to convince the President over the reasonable objections of his official advisors—and I had to have it *now*. Breaking all traffic laws, I could not clip much off two and a half hours running time back to Washington.

What should I do? Go downtown, mingle with crowds, and then tell Martinez that I was sure that almost every man I passed was possessed? How could I prove it? For that matter, how could I myself be certain? As long as the titans kept up the farce of "business as usual," the telltales would be subtle, a super-abundance of round shoulders, not enough bare ones.

I had some notion of how the city had been saturated, granting a large enough supply of slugs. I felt sure that I would encounter another toll gate trap on the way out and that there would be others on launching platforms and at every entrance and exit to the city proper. Every person leaving would be a new agent; every person entering would be a new slave.

I had noticed a vendo-printer for the *Kansas City Star* on the last corner I had passed. Now I swung around the block, pulled up to it and got out. I shoved a dime in the slot and waited nervously for my paper to be printed.

The *Star*'s format had its usual dull respectability — no excitement, no mention of an emergency, no reference to "Schedule Bareback." The lead story was headed PHONE SERVICE DISRUPTED BY SUNSPOT STORM, with a subhead *City Semi-Isolated by Solar Static*. There was a 3-col, semi-stereo, tru-kolor of the sun, its face disfigured by cosmic acne. It was a convincing and unexciting explanation of why Mamie Schultz, herself free of parasites, could not get her call through to Grandma in Pittsburgh.

I tucked the paper under my arms to study later and turned back to my car . . . just as a police car glided silently up and cramped in across the nose of it. A moment before the corner was deserted. Suddenly there were

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people all around and the cop was coming toward me. My hand crept toward my gun; I would have dropped him had I not been sure that most of those around me were equally dangerous.

He stopped in front of me. "Let me see your license," he said pleasantly.

"Certainly, officer. It's clipped to the instrument board." I stepped past him, letting it be assumed that he would follow. I could feel him hesitate, then take the bait. I led him around between my car and his. This let me see that he did not have a mate in his car, a most welcome variation from human practice. More important, it placed my car between me and the too-innocent bystanders.

"There," I said, pointing inside, "it's fastened down." Again he hesitated, then looked — long enough for my left hand to slap his shoulders and clutch with all its strength.

His body seemed to explode, so violent was the spasm. I was in the car and gunning it almost before he hit the pavement.

The masquerade broke as abruptly as it had in Barnes' outer office; the crowd closed in. One woman clung by her nails to the outside of the car for fifty feet or more before she fell off. By then I was making speed, cutting in and out of traffic, ready to take to the air but lacking space.

A street showed up on the left. I slammed into it. It was a mistake; trees arched over it and I could not take off. The next turn was even worse. Of necessity I slowed down. Now I was cruising at conservative city speed, still watching for some boulevard wide enough for an illegal takeoff. My thoughts began to catch up and I realized that there was no sign of pursuit.

My knowledge of the masters came to my aid. Except for "direct conference" a titan lives in and through his host; he sees what the host sees, receives and passes on information through whatever organs and by whatever means are available to the host. It was unlikely that any of the slugs at that corner had been looking for that particular car other than the one inhabiting the body of a policeman—and I had settled with it! Now, of course, the other parasites present would be on the lookout for me, too, but they had only the abilities and facilities of their hosts. I decided that I need treat them with no more respect than I would give to any casual crowd of witnesses, i.e., ignore them; change neighborhoods and forget it.

For I had barely thirty minutes left and I had decided on what I needed as proof—a prisoner, a man who had been possessed and

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could tell what had happened to the city. I must act *now*.

Even as I decided, I saw a man walking in the block ahead, stepping along like a man who sees home and supper. I pulled alongside him and said, "Hey!"

He stopped. "Yes?"

"I've just come from City Hall. No time to explain—slide in and we'll have a direct conference."

"City Hall? What are you talking about?"

I said, "Change in plans. Don't waste time. Get in!"

He backed away. I jumped out and grabbed at his hunched shoulders. My hand struck human flesh, and the man began to yell.

I jumped into the car and got out of there fast. When I was blocks away I slowed and thought it over. Could it be that my nerves were so overwrought that I saw signs of titans where there were none?

No! The toll gate, the sunsuits, the swimming pool, the cop at the vendo-printer—those facts-I *knew* —and this last fact simply meant that I had picked the one man in ten, or whatever the odds were, who was not yet recruited.

I speeded up, looking for a new victim.

He was a middle-aged man watering his lawn, so normal in appearance that I was half a mind to pass him by. But I had no time left—and he wore a sweater which bulged suspiciously.

He looked up as I stopped. "I've just come from City Hall," I told him. "You and I need a direct conference right away."

He said quietly, "Come in the house. That car is too public."

I wanted to refuse, but he was already heading for the house. As I came up he whispered, "Careful. The woman is not of us."

Had I seen her on the veranda, I would have passed him by, for she was dressed in bra and skirt and so could not have been possessed.

"Your wife?"

"Yes."

We stopped on the porch and he said, "My dear, this is Mr. O'Keefe. We have business to discuss. We'll be in the study."

She smiled and answered, "Certainly, my love. Good evening, Mr. O'Keefe. Sultry, isn't it?"

I agreed and she went back to her knitting. We went inside, where the man ushered me into his study. Since we were keeping the masquerade I went in first, as befitted an escorted visitor. I did not like turning my back on him. For that reason I was half expecting it; he hit me near the base of the neck. I rolled with it and went down almost unhurt. I continued to roll and fetched up on my back.

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In training school they used to slap us with sandbags for trying to get up, once down. So I stayed down and was threatening him with my heels as soon as I hit. He shuffled out of range. Apparently he did not have a gun and I could not get at mine. But there was a real fireplace in the room, complete with poker, shovel, and tongs; he circled toward it. A small table was just out of my reach. I lunged, grabbed a leg and threw it.

It caught him in the face as he grabbed the poker. Then I was on him.

His master was dying in my fingers and he himself was convulsing under its last, terrible command when I became aware of his wife, screaming in the doorway. I bounced up and let her have one. She went down in midscream and I returned to her husband.

A limp man is amazingly hard to lift and he was heavy. Fortunately I am a big husky; I managed a lumbering dog trot toward the car. I doubt if our fight disturbed anyone but his wife, but her screams must have aroused half that end of town. There were people popping out of doors on both sides of the street. So far, none of them was near, but I was glad that I had left the car door open.

Then I was sorry; a brat like the one who had given me trouble earlier was inside, fiddling with the controls. Cursing, I dumped my prisoner in the lounge circle and grabbed the kid. He struggled, but I tore him loose and threw him out—into the arms of the first of my pursuers. He was still untangling himself when I slammed into the seat and shot forward without bothering with door or safety belt.

As I took the first corner, the door swung shut and I almost went out of my seat. I held a straight course long enough to fasten the belt, cut sharp another corner, nearly ran down a ground car, and went on.

I found a wide boulevard—the Paseo, I think—and jabbed the takeoff key. Possibly I caused several wrecks; I had no time to look. Without waiting to reach altitude, I wrestled her to course east. I kept her on manual across Missouri and expended every launching unit in her racks to give more speed. That reckless, illegal trick may have saved my neck; somewhere over Columbia, just as I fired the last one, I felt the car shake to concussion. Someone had launched an interceptor and the pesky thing had fused where I had just been.

There were no more shots, which was good; I would have been a duck on water from then on. My starboard impeller began

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to run hot, either from the near miss or simply from abuse. I let it heat, praying that it would not fly apart for another ten minutes. Then, with the Mississippi behind me and the indicator 'way up into "danger," I cut it out and let the car limp along on the port unit. Three hundred was the best she would do—but I was out of Zone Red.

I HAD not had time to give my passenger more than a glance. He lay sprawled on the floor pads, unconscious or dead. Now that I was back among men and no longer had power for illegal speeds, there was no reason not to go automatic. I flipped the transponder, signaled a request for a block assignment, and put the controls on automatic without waiting for permission. I then swung around into the lounge and looked my man over.

He was still breathing. There was a welt on his face, but no bones seemed broken. I slapped his face and dug thumbnails into his earlobes, but I could not rouse him. The dead slug was beginning to stink and I had no way to dispose of it. I left him and went back to the control seat.

The chronometer read twenty-one thirty-seven, Washington time—and I still had better than six hundred miles to go. Allowing nothing for landing, for tearing over to the White House and finding the Old Man, I would reach Washington a few minutes after midnight. So I was already late and the Old Man was sure as the devil going to make me stay in after school for it.

I tried to start the starboard impeller. No dice. It was probably frozen solid. Just as well. Anything that goes that fast can be explosively dangerous if it gets out of balance. So I desisted and tried to raise the Old Man by phone.

The phone would not work. Perhaps I had jiggered it in one of the spots of exercise I had been forced to take. I put it back, feeling that this was one of those days when it had not been worthwhile to get out of bed. I turned to the car's communicator and punched the emergency tab.

"Control," I called out. "Control!"

The screen lighted up and I was looking at a young man. He was, I saw with relief, bare to the waist. "Control answering—Block Fox Eleven. What are you doing in the air? I've been trying to raise you ever since you entered my block."

"Never mind! Patch me into the nearest military circuit. This is crash priority!"

He looked uncertain, but the screen flickered and another picture built up, showing a military

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message center. That did my heart good; everyone in sight was stripped to the waist. In the foreground was a young watch officer. I could have kissed him. Instead I said, "Military emergency. Patch me through the Pentagon and there to the White House."

"Who are you?"

"I'm a civil agent and you wouldn't recognize my I.D. Hurry!"

I might have talked him into it, but he was shouldered out of scan by a wing commander. "Land at once!" was all he said.

"Look, skipper," I said, "this is a military emergency. You've got to put me through. I—"

"*This* is a military emergency," he interrupted. "Civil craft have been grounded the past three hours. Land at once."

"But I've got to—"

"Land or be shot down. We are tracking; I am about to launch an interceptor to burst a half mile ahead of you. Make any maneuver but landing, and the next will burst on."

"Will you *listen,* please? I'll land, but I've got to get—" He switched off.

The first burst seemed short of a half mile ahead. I landed and cracked up, but without hurting myself or my passenger.

I did not have long to wait. They had me flare-lighted and were swooping down before I had satisfied myself that the boat wouldn't move. They took me in and I met the wing commander personally. He even put my message through after his psych squad got through giving me the antidote for the sleep test. By then it was one-thirteen, zone five—and "Schedule Counter Blast" had been under way one hour and thirteen minutes.

The Old Man listened to a summary, grunted, then told me to see him in the morning.

XIX

"SCHEDULE Counter Blast" was something tremendous. The parachute drops were made just at midnight, Zone Five, on over ninety-six hundred communication points—newspaper offices, block controls, relay stations, and so forth. The raiding squads were the cream of our skyborne forces, plus technicians to put each communication point back into service.

Whereupon the President's speech was to go out from each local station. "Schedule Bareback" would take effect all through the infected territory. The war would soon be over.

By twenty-five minutes after midnight, reports started coming in that such-and-such points were secured. A little later there were calls for help from other points.

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By one in the morning most of the reserves had been committed, but the operation seemed to be going well—so well that unit commanders were landing and reporting from the ground.

That was the last anybody ever heard of them.

Zone Red swallowed up the task force as if it had never existed—over eleven thousand craft, more than a hundred and sixty thousand fighting men and technicians, seventy-one group commanders and—why go on? The United States had received its worst military setback since Black Sunday. I am not criticizing Martinez, Rexton, and the General Staff, nor those poor devils who made the drop. The program was based on what appeared to be a true picture, and the situation called for fast action with the best we had.

It was nearly daylight, so I understand, before Martinez and Rexton got it through their heads that the messages they had gotten back about successes were actually fakes sent by their own men —*our* own men—but hag-ridden, possessed, inducted by the enemy. After my report, more than an hour too late to stop the raids, the Old Man had tried to get them not to send in any more men, but they were flushed with success and anxious to make a clean sweep.

The Old Man asked the President to insist on visual checks, but the operation was being controlled by relay through Space Station Alpha and there just aren't enough channels to parallel audio with video through a space station. Rexton had said, "Quit worrying. As fast as we get local stations back in our hands, our boys will patch into the ground relay net and you will have all the visual evidence you want."

The Old Man had pointed out that by then it would be too late. Rexton had burst out, "Confound it, man! Do you want a thousand men to be killed just to quiet your jitters?"

The President backed up Rexton.

By morning they had their visual evidence. Stations in the central valley were giving out with the same old *Rise and Shine with Mary Sunshine, Breakfast with the Browns,* and such junk. There was not a station with the President's stereocast, not one that conceded that anything had happened. The military despatches tapered off around four o'clock and Rexton's frantic calls were not answered.

Task Force Redemption ceased to exist—*spurlos versenkt.*

I DID not get to see the Old Man until nearly eleven the

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next morning. He let me report without comment, and without bawling me out, which was worse.

He was about to dismiss me when I put in, "How about my prisoner? Didn't he confirm my conclusions?"

"Oh, him? Still unconscious. They don't expect him to live."

"I'd like to see him."

"You stick to things you understand."

"Well, have you got something for me to do?"

"I think you had better—No, trot down to the Zoo. You'll see things that put a different light on what you picked up in Kansas City."

"Huh?"

"Look up Doctor Morris, the assistant director. Tell him I sent you."

Morris was a nice little guy who looked like one of his own baboons; he turned me over to a Doctor Vargas who was a specialist in exotic biologies — the same Vargas who was on the Second Venus Expedition. He showed me what had happened. If the Old Man and I had gone to the National Zoological Gardens instead of sitting around in the park, it would not have been necessary for me to go to Kansas City. The ten titans we had captured in Congress, plus two the next day, had been sent to the Zoo to be placed on anthropoids—chimps and orangutans, mostly. None were on gorillas.

The Director had had the apes locked up in the Zoo's hospital. Two chimpanzees, Abelard and Heloise, were caged together; they had always been mates and there seemed no reason to separate them. That sums up our psychological difficulty in dealing with the titans. Even the men who transplanted the slugs still thought of the result as apes, rather than as titans.

The next treatment cage held a family of tuberculous gibbons. They were not used as hosts, since they were sick, and there was no communication between cages. They were shut one from another by sliding panels and each cage had its own air-conditioning. The next morning the panel had been slid back and the gibbons and the chimps were together. Abelard or Heloise had found some way to pick the lock. The lock was supposed to be monkey proof, but it was not ape-*cum*-titan proof.

Five gibbons, plus two chimps, plus two titans—but the next morning there were seven apes ridden by *seven* titans.

This was discovered while I was leaving for Kansas City, not enough time for the Old Man to have been notified. Had there been, he would have known that Kansas City was saturated and

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"Schedule Counter Blast" would not have taken place.

"I saw the President's broadcast," Dr. Vargas said to me. "Weren't you the man who—I mean, weren't you the—"

"Yes, I was the man who," I agreed shortly.

"Then you can tell us a great deal about these phenomena."

"Perhaps I should be able to," I admitted, "but I can't."

"Do you mean that no cases of fission reproduction took place while you were—uh—their prisoner?"

"That's right." I thought about it. "At least I think that's right."

"I was given to understand that victims have full memory of their experiences."

"Well, they do and they don't." I tried to explain the odd detached frame of mind of a servant of the masters.

"I suppose it could happen while you sleep," he said.

"Maybe. Besides sleep, there is another time, or rather times, which are difficult to remember. During conference."

"Conference?" When I explained, his eyes lit up. "Oh, you mean conjugation."

"No, I mean conference."

"We mean the same thing. Don't you see? Conjugation and fission—they reproduce at will, whenever the supply of hosts permits. Probably one contact for each fission; then, when opportunity exists, fission. Two adult daughter parasites in a matter of hours. Less, possibly."

If that were true—and, looking at the gibbons, I could not doubt it—then why had we depended on shipments at the Constitution Club? Or had we? I did not know; I did what my master wanted done and saw only what came under my eyes. But it was clear how Kansas City had been saturated. With plenty of "live stock" at hand and a spaceship loaded with transit cells to draw from, the titans had reproduced to match the human population.

Assume a thousand slugs in that spaceship, the one we believed to have landed near Kansas City; suppose that they could reproduce every twenty-four hours, when given opportunity.

First day, one thousand slugs.

Second day, two thousand.

Third day, four thousand.

At the end of the first week—the eighth day, that is—*a hundred and twenty-eight thousand slugs!*

After two weeks, *more than sixteen million slugs!*

But we did not know that they were limited to spawning once a day. Nor did we know that a Flying Saucer could lift only a thousand transit cells. It might be ten thousand or more or less. Assume ten thousand as breed-

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ing stock with fission every twelve hours. In two weeks the answer comes out——

MORE THAN TWO AND A HALF TRILLION!

The figure did not mean anything; it was cosmic.

I felt worse than I had in Kansas City.

DR. Vargas introduced me to a Dr. McIlvaine of the Smithsonian Institution. McIlvaine was a comparative psychologist, the author, so Vargas told me, of *Mars, Venus, and Earth: A Study in Motivating Purposes.* Vargas seemed to expect me to be impressed, but I had not read it. Anyhow, how can anyone study the motives of Martians when they were all dead before we climbed down out of trees?

McIlvaine asked me, "Mr. Nivens, how long does a conference last?"

"Conjugation," Vargas corrected him.

"Conference," McIlvaine repeated. "It's the more important aspect."

"But, Doctor," Vargas insisted, "conjugation is the means of gene exchange whereby mutation is spread through—"

"Anthropocentricism, Doctor! You do not know that this life form has genes."

Vargas turned red. "You will allow me gene equivalents?" he said stiffly.

"Why should I? You are reasoning by uncertain analogy. There is only one characteristic common to all life forms and that is the drive to survive."

"And to reproduce," insisted Vargas.

"Suppose the organism is immortal and has no need to reproduce?"

Vargas shrugged. "We know that they reproduce." He gestured at the apes.

"And I am suggesting," McIlvaine came back, "that this is not reproduction, but a single organism availing itself of more space. No, Doctor, it is possible to get so immersed in the idea of the zygote-gamete cycle that one forgets there may be other patterns."

"But throughout the Solar System—"

McIlvaine cut him short. "Anthropocentric, terrocentric, solocentric — it is a provincial approach. These creatures may be from outside the Solar System entirely."

I said, "Oh, no!" I had a sudden flash picture of the planet Titan and with it a choking sensation.

Neither one noticed. McIlvaine continued, "Take the ameba—a more basic and much more successful life form than ours. The

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motivational psychology of the ameba—"

I switched off my ears; free speech gives a man the right to talk about the "psychology" of an ameba, but I don't have to listen.

They did some direct experimentation which restored my interest. Vargas had a baboon wearing a slug placed in the cage with the gibbons and chimps. As soon as the newcomer was dumped in, they gathered in a ring facing outward and went into direct conference, slug to slug.

McIlvaine jabbed his finger at them. "You see? Conference is *not* for reproduction, but for exchange of memory. The organism, temporarily divided, has now re-identified itself."

I could have told him the same thing without the double talk. A master who has been out of touch always gets into direct conference as soon as possible.

"Hypothecation!" Vargas snorted. "They have no opportunity to reproduce just now." He ordered the boss of the handling crew to bring in another ape.

"Little Abe?" asked the crew boss.

"No, I want one without a parasite. Let me see—make it Old Red."

The crew boss said, "Cripes, Doc, don't pick on Old Red."

"This won't hurt him."

"How about Satan? He's a mean bastard anyway."

"All right, but hurry it up."

So they brought in Satan, a coal-black chimp. He may have been aggressive elsewhere; he was not so here. When they dumped him inside, he shrank back against the door and began to whine. It was like watching an execution. I had had my nerves under control—a man can get used to anything—but the ape's hysteria was contagious. I wanted to run.

At first the hag-ridden apes simply stared at him like a jury. This went on for a long while. Satan's whines changed to low moans and he covered his face. Presently Vargas said, "Doctor! Look!"

"Where?"

"Lucy, the old female. There." He pointed.

It was the matriarch of consumptive gibbons. Her back was toward us; the slug thereon had humped itself together. An iridescent line ran down the center of it.

It began to split as an egg splits. In a few minutes only, the division was complete. One new slug centered itself over her spine; the other flowed down her back as she squatted almost to the floor. It slithered off, plopped gently on the concrete and crept slowly toward Satan. The ape screamed

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hoarsely and swarmed up into the top of the cage.

So help me, the slugs sent a squad to *arrest* him—two gibbons, a chimp, and the baboon. They tore him loose and held him face-down on the floor.

The slug slithered closer.

It was a good two feet away when it grew a pseudopod—slowly, at first, a stalk that weaved around like a cobra. Then it lashed out and struck the ape on a foot. The others promptly let go, but Satan did not move.

The titan seemed to pull itself in by the extension it had formed and attached itself to Satan's foot. From there it crawled up. When it reached the base of his spine, Satan sat erect. He shook himself and joined the others.

Vargas and McIlvaine started talking excitedly, apparently unmoved. I wanted to smash something—for me, for Satan.

McIlvaine maintained that we were seeing something new to our concepts, an intelligent creature so organized as to be immortal and continuous in its personal identity — or its group identity.

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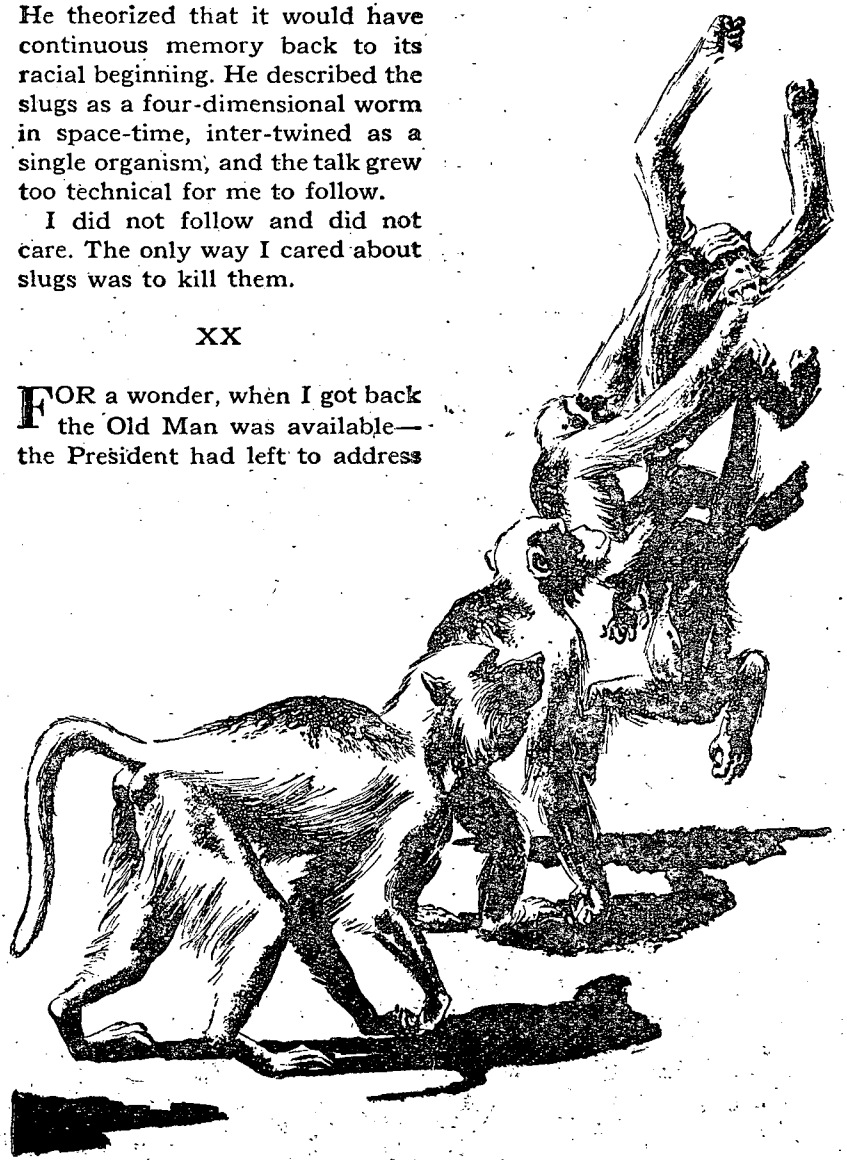
He theorized that it would have continuous memory back to its racial beginning. He described the slugs as a four-dimensional worm in space-time, inter-twined as a single organism, and the talk grew too technical for me to follow.

I did not follow and did not care. The only way I cared about slugs was to kill them.

XX

FOR a wonder, when I got back the Old Man was available—the President had left to address



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a secret session of the United Nations. I told the Old Man what I had seen and added my opinion of Vargas and McIlvaine. "Boy Scouts," I complained, "comparing stamp collections. They don't realize it's serious."

The Old Man shook his head. "Don't sell them short, son," he advised me. "They are more likely to come up with the answer than are you and I."

"They're more likely to let those slugs escape."

"Did they tell you about the elephant?"

"What elephant? They damn near didn't tell me anything; they got interested in each other and ignored me."

"You don't understand scientific detachment. About the elephant: an ape with a rider got out, somehow. Its body was found trampled to death in the elephant house. And one of the elephants was gone."

"You mean there is an elephant loose *with a slug on him?*" I had a horrid vision, something like a tank on the loose with a cybernetic brain.

"Her," the Old Man corrected me. "They found her over in Maryland, quietly pulling up cabbages. No parasite."

"Where did the slug get to?" Involuntarily I glanced around.

"A duo was stolen in the adjoining village. I'd say the slug is somewhere west of the Mississippi by now."

"Anybody missing?"

He shrugged again. "How can you tell in a free country? At least, the titan can't hide on a human host anywhere short of Zone Red."

His comment made me think of something I had seen at the zoo and had not reasoned out. Whatever it was, it eluded me. The Old Man went on, "It's taken drastic action to make the bare-shoulders order stick, though. The President has had protests on moral grounds, not to mention the National Association of Haberdashers."

"Huh?"

"You would think we were trying to sell their daughters down to Rio. There was a delegation in, called themselves the Mothers of the Republic, or some such nonsense."

"The President's time is being wasted like *that,* at a time like *this?*"

"McDonough handled them. But he roped me in on it." The Old Man looked pained. "We told them that they could not see the President unless they stripped. That stopped 'em."

The thought that had been bothering me came to the surface. "Say, boss, you might have to."

"Have to what?"

"Make people strip."

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He chewed his lip. "What are you driving at?"

"Do we know, as a certainty, that a slug can attach itself only near the base of the brain?"

"You should know."

"I thought I did, but now I'm not sure. That's the way we always did it, when I was, uh, with them." I recounted in more detail what I had seen when Vargas had had poor old Satan exposed to a slug. "That ape moved as soon as the thing reached the base of his spine. I'm sure they prefer to ride up near the brain. But maybe they could ride down inside pants or dresses and just put out an extension to the end of the spinal cord."

"Hmm . . . you'll remember, son, the first time I had a crowd searched, I made everybody peel to the buff."

"I think you were justified. They might be able to conceal themselves anywhere on the body. Take those droopy drawers you've got on. One could hide in them and it would just make you look a bit satchel-fannied."

"Want me to take 'em off?"

"I can do better than that; I'll give you the Kansas City Clutch." My words were joking but I was not; I grabbed at the bunchiness of his pants. He submitted with good grace, then gave me the same treatment.

"But we can't," he complained as he sat down, "go around clutching women by the rump."

"You may have to," I pointed out, "or make everybody strip."

"We'll run some experiments."

"How?" I asked.

"You know that head-and-spine armor? It's not worth much, except to give the wearer a feeling of security. I'll tell Doctor Morris to take an ape, fit such an armor so that a slug can't reach anything but his legs, say, and see what happens. We'll vary the areas, too."

"Uh, yes. But don't use an ape."

"Why not?"

"Well, they're too human."

"Damn it, bub, you can't make an omelet—"

"— without breaking eggs. Okay, but I don't have to like it."

XXI

I SPENT the next several days lecturing to brass, answering fool questions about what titans ate for lunch, explaining how to tackle a man who was possessed. I was billed as an "expert," but half the time my pupils seemed sure they knew more than I did.

The titans continued to hold Zone Red, but they could not break out without being spotted —we hoped. And we did not try to break in again because every slug held one of our own people as hostage. The United Nations

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was no help. The President wanted a "Schedule Bareback" on a global scale, but they hemmed and hawed and sent the matter to committee for investigation. The truth was they did not believe us; that was the enemy's great advantage—only the burned believed in the fire.

Some nations were safe because of their own customs. A Finn who did not climb into a steam bath in company every day or so would have been conspicuous. The Japanese, too, were casual about mixed bathing. The South Seas were relatively safe, as were large parts of Africa. France had gone enthusiastically nudist, on weekends at least, right after World War III—a slug would have a tough time hiding. But in countries where the body-modesty taboo meant something, a slug could stay hidden until his host dropped dead. The United States itself, Canada, England—particularly England.

They flew three slugs, with apes, to London. I understand the King wanted to set an example as the President had, but the Prime Minister, egged on by the Archbishop of Canterbury, would not let him. Nothing about this appeared in the news and the story may not be true, but English skin was not exposed to the cold stares of neighbors.

The Russian propaganda system began to blast us as soon as they had worked out a new line. The whole thing was an "American imperialist fantasy." I wondered why the titans had not attacked Russia first; the place seemed tailor-made for them. On second thought, I wondered if they had. On third thought, I wondered what difference it would make.

I did not see the Old Man during this period; I got my assignments from Oldfield, his deputy. Consequently I did not know it when Mary was relieved from special duty with the President. I ran into her in the lounge of the Section offices. "Mary!" I yelped.

She gave me that slow, sweet smile and moved over. "Hello, darling!" she whispered. She did not ask what I had been doing, nor scold me that I had not been in touch with her, nor even comment on how long it had been. Mary let water over the dam take care of itself.

Not me—I babbled. "This is great! I thought you were still tucking the President into his beddy-bye. How long have you been here? When do you have to go back? Say, can I dial you a drink—no, you've got one." I started to dial one for myself; it popped out into my hand. "Huh? How'd this get here?"

"I ordered it when you came in the door."

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"Mary, did I tell you that you are wonderful?"

"No."

"I will. You're wonderful."

"Thank you."

I went on, "Couldn't you get some leave? They can't expect you to be on duty twenty-four hours a day, week after week, with no time off. I'm going straight to the Old Man and tell him—"

"I'm on leave, Sam."

"—just what I think of—You *are*? For how long?"

"Subject to call. All leaves read that way now."

"How long have you been on leave?"

"Since yesterday. I've been sitting here, waiting for you."

"Yesterday!" I had spent yesterday giving kindergarten lectures to brasshats who did not want them. I stood up. "Don't move. I'll be right back."

I rushed over to the operations office. Oldfield looked up when I came in and said in a surly tone, "What do *you* want?"

"Chief, that series of bedtime stories I'm scheduled to tell—better cancel them."

"Why?"

"I'm a sick man; I've rated sick leave for a long time. Now I've got to take it."

"You're sick in the head."

"That's right, I'm sick in the head. I hear voices. People have been following me around. I keep dreaming I'm back with the titans." That last point was true.

"But since when has being crazy been any handicap in this section?" He waited for me to argue the point.

"Look, do I get leave or don't I?"

He fumbled through papers, found one and tore it up. "Okay. Keep your phone handy; you're subject to recall. Get out."

I got. Mary looked up when I came in and gave me the soft warm treatment again. I said, "Grab your things. We're leaving."

She did not ask where; she simply stood up. I snatched my drink, gulped some and spilled the rest. We were up on the pedestrian level of the city before we spoke. Then I asked, "Where do you want to get married?"

"Sam, we discussed that before."

"Sure we did and now we are going to do it. Where?"

"Sam, my very dear, I will do what you say. But I am still opposed to it."

"Why?"

"Let's go to my apartment. I'd like to cook dinner for you."

"Okay, you can cook dinner—but not there. And we get married first."

"Please, Sam!"

Somebody said, "Keep pitch-

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ing, kid. She's weakening." I looked around and found that we were playing to a gallery.

I swept an arm wide and shouted irritably, "Haven't you people got anything to do? Go get drunk!"

Somebody else said, "I'd say he ought to take her offer."

I grabbed Mary's arm and did not say another word until I had gotten her into a cab. "All right," I said gruffly, "let's have your reasons."

"I'm yours; you don't need a contract, so why get married, Sam?"

"Why? Because I love you, damn it!"

She did not answer for quite a while. I thought I had offended her. When she did, I could hardly hear her. "You hadn't mentioned that before, Sam."

"Hadn't I? Oh, I must have."

"No, I'm quite sure you haven't. Why didn't you?"

"An oversight, I guess. I'm not sure I know what the word 'love' means."

"Neither am I," she said softly, "but I love to hear you say it. Say it again, please."

"Huh? Okay. I love you. I love you, Mary."

"Oh, Sam!"

She snuggled against me and began to tremble. I shook her a little. "How about *you?*"

"Me? Oh, I do love you, Sam. I've loved you ever since—"

"Ever since what?"

I expected her to say that she had loved me ever since I took her place in "Project Interview." What she said was, "I've loved you ever since you slapped me."

Now, is that logic?

The driver was cruising slowly along the Connecticut coast; I had to wake him before I could get him to land in Westport. We went to the city hall. I stepped up to a counter in the bureau of sanctions and licenses and said to a clerk, "Is this where we get married?"

"That's up to you," he answered. "Hunting licenses on the left, dog licenses on the right, this is the happy medium."

"Good," I said stiffly. "Will you oblige by issuing a license?"

"Sure. Everybody ought to get married at least once; that's what I tell my old lady." He got out a form. "Let's have your serial numbers." We gave them to him. "Either of you married in any other state?" We said we weren't. "You're sure? If you don't tell me, so I can put on a rider showing other contracts, this contract ain't valid."

We told him again that we weren't married anywhere. He went on, "Term, renewable, or lifetime? If it's over ten years, the fee is the same as for lifetime. If it's under six months, you get the

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short form from that vendo machine over there."

Mary said in a small voice, "Lifetime."

The clerk looked surprised. "The renewable contract, with the automatic option clause, is just as permanent, and you don't have to go through the courts if you change your mind."

I said, "You heard the lady!"

"Okay, okay. Either party, mutual consent, or binding?"

"Binding," I answered, and Mary nodded.

"Binding it is," he agreed, bending over the typer. "Now the meat of the matter: who pays and how much? Salary or endowment?"

I said, "Salary." I didn't own enough to set up a fund.

"Neither," Mary stated. "This is not a financial contract."

The clerk stopped completely. "Lady, don't be foolish," he said reasonably. "You heard the gentleman say he was willing to do the right thing."

"No."

"Hadn't you better talk with your lawyer before you go ahead? There's a public communicator in the hall."

"No!"

"Well, I'm darned if I see what you need a license for."

"Neither do I," Mary told him.

"You mean you don't want this?"

"No! Put it down the way I told you to. No salary."

The clerk looked helpless but bent over the typer. "I guess that's all," he said finally. "You've kept it simple, I'll say that. 'Do-you-both-solemnly-swear-that-the-above-facts-are-true-to-the-best-of-your-knowledge-and-belief-that-you-are-entering-into-this-agreement-uninfluenced-by-drugs-or-other-illegal-inducements-and-that-there-exists-no-undisclosed-covenants-nor-other-legal-impediments-to-the-execution-and-registration-of-the-above-contract?"

We both said that we did and we were and it was and there weren't. He pulled it out of the typer. "Let's have your thumb prints. Okay, that'll be ten dollars, including federal tax." I paid him and he shoved the form into the copier and threw the switch. "Copies will be mailed to you," he announced, "at your serial-number addresses. Now, what type of ceremony are you looking for? Maybe I can help."

"As quick, plain and cheap as it can be," Mary told him.

"Then I've got just what you want. Old Doctor Chamleigh. Non-sectarian, best stereo accompaniment in town, all four walls and full orchestra. He gives you the works, fertility rites and everything, but dignified. And he tops it off with a fatherly straight-

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from-the-shoulder word of advice. Makes you feel *married*."

"No." This time I said it.

"Come on!" the clerk said to me. "Think of the little lady. If she sticks by what she just swore to, she'll never have another chance. Every girl is entitled to a formal wedding. Honest, I don't get much of a commission."

I said, "You can marry us, can't you? Go ahead. Get it over with!"

He blinked at me. "Didn't you know? In this state you marry yourself. You've *been* married, ever since you thumbprinted the license."

I said, "Oh." Mary didn't say anything. We left.

I hired a duo at the landing flat north of town; the heap was ten years old, but it had full-automatic and that was all that mattered. I looped around the City, cut across Manhattan Crater, and set the controls. I was happy though nervous—and then Mary put her arms around me. After a long time I heard the BEEEEP! *beep-beep* BEEEEP! of the beacon at my shack, whereupon I unwound myself and landed. Mary said sleepily, "Where are we?"

"At my cabin in the mountains," I told her.

"I didn't know you had a cabin in the mountains. I thought you were headed for my apartment."

"What, and risk those bear traps? Anyhow, it's not mine; it's ours."

She kissed me again, which made me kind of louse up the landing. She slid out ahead of me while I was securing the board; I found her staring at the shack. "Sweetheart, it's beautiful!"

"You can't beat the Adirondacks," I agreed. There was a slight haze with the sun low in the west, giving that wonderful depth-upon-depth stereo look.

She glanced at it and said, "Yes, but I didn't mean that. I meant your — our — cabin. Let's go inside right now."

"Suits," I agreed, "but it's really just a simple shack." Which it was. Not even an indoor pool. When I came up here, I didn't want to feel that I had brought the city with me. The shell was conventional steel and fiberglass, but I had had it veneered in duroslabs which looked like real logs. The inside was just as simple—a big living room with a real fireplace, deep rugs and plenty of low chairs. The services were in a Kompacto special, buried under the foundation — air-conditioner, power pack, cleansing system, sound equipment, plumbing, radiation alarm, servos — everything but deep-freeze and the other kitchen equipment, out of sight and mind. Even the stereo screens would not be noticed unless in

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use. It was about as near as a man could get to a real log cabin and still have a little comfort.

"*I* think it's lovely," Mary said seriously. "I wouldn't want an ostentatious place."

"You and me both." I worked the combo and the door dilated; Mary was inside at once. "Hey! Come back!" I yelled.

She did, looking puzzled. "What's the matter, Sam? Did I do something wrong?"

"You sure did." I swung her up in my arms and carried her across the threshold, kissing her as I put her down. "There. Now you are in your own house, properly."

The lights, of course, came on automatically as we entered. She looked around, then turned and threw her arms around my neck. "Oh, darling, darling!"

We took time out. Then she started wandering around, touching things. "Sam, if I had planned it myself, it would have been just this way."

"It has only one bathroom," I apologized. "We'll have to rough it."

"I don't mind. I'm glad; now I know you didn't bring any of those women of yours up here."

"What women?"

"You know darn well. If you had been planning this as a nest, you would have included a powder room."

"You know too much."

She did not answer but wandered out into the kitchen. I heard her squeal.

"What's the matter?" I asked.

"I never expected to find a real kitchen in a bachelor's lodge."

"I'm not a bad cook. I wanted a kitchen, so I bought one."

"I'm glad. Now I *will* cook you dinner."

"It's your kitchen; suit yourself. But don't you want to wash up? You can have first crack at the shower. Tomorrow we'll get a catalog and you can pick out a bathroom of your own. We'll have it flown in."

"You take first shower," she said. "I want to start dinner."

MARY and I slipped into domesticity as if we had been married for years. Oh, not that our honeymoon was humdrum, or that there weren't a thousand things we still had to learn about each other—the point was that we already seemed to know the necessary things about each other that made us married. Especially Mary.

I don't remember those days too clearly. I was happy; I had forgotten what it was like, had not known that I was not happy. Interested, I used to be—diverted, entertained, amused—but not happy.

We did not turn on a stereo or

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read a book, we saw no one and spoke to no one, except that on the second day we walked down to the village; I wanted to show Mary off. On the way back we passed the shack of John the Goat, our local hermit. John did what little caretaking I required.

Seeing him, I waved. He waved back. He was dressed as usual, stocking cap, an old army blouse, shorts, and sandals. I thought of warning him about the bare-to-the-waist order, but decided against it. Instead I cupped my hands and shouted, "Send up the Pirate!"

"Who's the Pirate, darling?"

"You'll see."

As soon as we got back, the Pirate came in, for I had his little door keyed to his own *meeow*—the Pirate being a large and rakish tomcat. He strutted in, told me what he thought of people who stayed away so long, then head-bumped my ankle in forgiveness. After I roughed him up, he inspected Mary. She dropped to her knees and made the sounds used by people who understand cat protocol, but the Pirate looked her over suspiciously. Suddenly he jumped into her arms and commenced to buzz, while bumping her under the chin.

"That's a relief," I announced. "For a moment I didn't think I was going to be allowed to keep you."

Mary looked up and smiled. "You need not have worried. I'm two-thirds cat myself."

"What's the other third?"

"You'll find out."

From then on the cat was with us—or with Mary—almost all the time, except when I shut him out of our bedroom. That I would not stand for, though both Mary and the Pirate thought it small of me.

MARY never borrowed trouble. She did not like digging into the past. She would let me talk about mine, but not about her own. Once when I started quizzing her, she changed the subject saying, "Let's look at the sunset."

"Sunset?" I repeated. "Can't be. We just finished breakfast." The mixup about the time of day jerked me back to reality. "Mary, how long have we been up here?"

"Does it matter?"

"You bet it matters. It's been more than a week, I'm sure. One of these days our phones will start screaming and then it's back to the treadmill."

"In the meantime, what difference does it make?"

I still wanted to know what day it was. I could have found out by switching on a stereo, but I would probably have bumped into a newscast and I did not want that. I was still pretending that Mary and I were away in a dif-

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ferent world, where titans did not exist.

"Mary," I said fretfully, "how many tempus pills have you?"

"None."

"Well, I've got enough for us both, I suppose. Suppose we have just twenty-four more hours; we could stretch it out to a month, subjective time."

"No."

"Why not? Let's *carpe* that old *diem*."

She put a hand on my arm and looked up into my eyes. "No, darling, it's not for me. I must live each moment and not let it be spoiled by worrying about the moment ahead." I looked stubborn. She went on, "If you want to take them, I won't mind, but please don't ask me to."

"Confound it, I'm not going on a joy ride alone." She did not answer, which is the damnedest way of winning an argument.

Not that we argued. If I tried to start one, Mary would give in and somehow it would work out that I was mistaken. I did try several times to find out more about her; it seemed to me that I ought to know *something* about the woman I was married to. To one question she looked thoughtful and answered, "I sometimes wonder whether I ever did have a childhood—or was it something I dreamed last night?"

I asked her pointblank what her name was. "Mary," she said tranquilly.

"Mary really is your name?" I had long since told her my right name, but we went on using Sam.

"Certainly it's my name, dear. I've been Mary since you first called me that."

"Oh. All right, you are my beloved Mary. But what was your name before?"

Her eyes held an odd, hurt look, but she answered steadily, "I was once known Allucquere."

"Allucquere," I repeated, savoring it. "What a strange and beautiful name. My darling Allucquere."

"My name is Mary now." And that was that.

Somewhere, somewhen, I was convinced, Mary had been hurt, badly hurt. But it seemed unlikely that I was ever going to know about it. Presently I ceased to worry about it. She was what she was, and I was content to bask in the warm light of her presence.

I WENT on calling her Mary, but the name that she had once kept running through my mind. I wondered how it was spelled.

Then suddenly I knew. My pesky packrat memory was pawing away at the shelves in the back of my mind where I keep the useless junk that I am unable

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to get rid of. There had been a community, a colony that used an artificial language, even to given names—

The Whitmanites, that was it. The anarchist-pacifist cult that got kicked out of Canada, then failed to make a go of it in Little America. There was a book written by their prophet, *The Entropy of Joy;* it was full of pseudo-mathematical formulas for achieving happiness.

Everybody is for "happiness," just as they are against "sin," but the cult's practices got them in hot water. They had a curious and very ancient solution to their sexual problems, a solution which produced explosive results when the Whitmanite culture touched any other pattern of behavior. Even Little America had not been far enough away. I had heard somewhere that the remnants had emigrated to Venus—in which case they must all be dead by this time.

I put it out of my mind. If Mary were a Whitmanite, or had been reared that way, that was her business. I certainly was not going to let the cult's philosophy cause us a crisis now or ever;

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marriage is not ownership and wives are not property.

XXII

THE next time I mentioned tempus pills, she did not argue but suggested that we hold it down to a minimum dose. It was a fair compromise—we could always take more.

I prepared it as injections so that it would take hold faster. Ordinarily I watch a clock after I've taken tempus; when the second hand slows to a stop, I know I'm loaded. But my shack has no clocks and neither of us was bothering with ringwatches. It was sunrise and we had been awake all night, cuddled up on a big low couch by the fireplace.

We continued to lie there, feeling good and dreamy, and I was considering the idea that the drug had not worked. Then I realized that the sun had stopped rising. I watched a bird fluttering past the window. If I stared at him long enough, I could see his wings move.

I looked back from it to my wife. The Pirate was curled up on her stomach, his paws tucked in as a muff. They seemed asleep. "How about breakfast?" I said. "I'm starved."

"You get it," she answered. "If I move, I'll disturb Pirate."

"You promised to love, honor, and fix me breakfast," I replied and tickled her feet. She gasped and drew up her legs; the cat squawked and landed on the floor.

"Oh, dear!" she said. "You made me move too fast."

"Never mind the cat, woman; you're married to me." But I knew that I had made a mistake. In the presence of people not under the drug, one should move with great care. I simply hadn't thought about the cat; no doubt he thought we were behaving like drunken jumping jacks. I intentionally slowed down and tried to woo him.

No use— he was streaking toward his door. I could have stopped him, for to me his movement was a molasses crawl, but had I done so I would have frightened him more. I let him go.

Do you know, Mary was right? Tempus-fugit drug is no good for honeymoons. The ecstatic happiness I had felt before was masked by the euphoria of the drug. I had substituted a chemical fake for the true magic. Nevertheless it was a good day—or month. But I wished that I had stuck to the real thing.

Late that evening we came out of it. I felt the slight irritability which marks the loosening hold of the drug, found my ringwatch and timed my reflexes. When they were back to normal I timed Mary's, whereupon she informed

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me that she had been out of it for twenty minutes or so—pretty accurate matching of dosage.

"Do you want to go under again?" she asked.

I kissed her. "No. Frankly, I'm glad to be back."

"I'm so glad."

I had the usual ravenous appetite that one has afterward; I mentioned it. "In a minute," she said. "I want to call Pirate."

I had not missed him; the euphoria is like that. "Don't worry," I told her. "He often stays out all day."

"He never has before."

"He has with me," I answered.

"I think I offended him. I know I did."

"He's probably down at Old John's. That's his usual way of punishing me. He'll be all right."

"But it's late at night—I'm afraid a fox might get him. Do you mind, darling? I'll just step out and call him." She headed for the door.

"Put something on," I suggested. "It will be nippy out."

She went back to the bedroom and got a negligee I had bought for her the day we had gone to the village. She went out. I put wood on the fire and ambled into the kitchen. While I was trying

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to make up my mind about a menu, I heard her saying, "Bad, bad cat, you worried mama," in that cooing voice suitable for babies and house animals.

I called out, "Fetch him in and close the door—and mind the penguins!" She did not answer and I did not hear the door relax, so I went back into the living room. She was just coming in and did not have the cat with her. I started to speak and then caught sight of her eyes. They were staring, filled with unspeakable horror.

I said, "Mary!" and started toward her. She seemed to see me and turned back toward the door; her movements were jerky, spasmodic. Then I saw her shoulders.

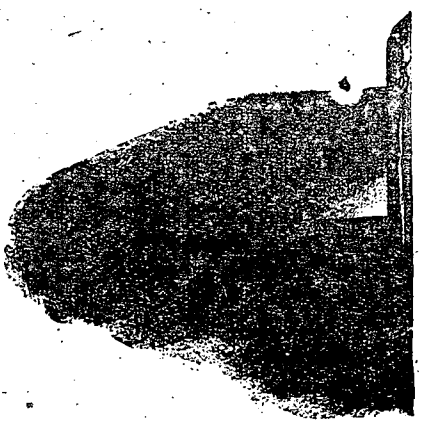
Under the negligee was a hump.

I don't know how long I stood there. Probably a split second, but it is burned into me as endless. I jumped and grabbed her by the arms. She looked at me and her eyes were no longer wells of horror but merely dead.

She gave me the knee.

I squeezed and managed to avoid the worst of it. Look, you don't tackle a dangerous opponent by grabbing his arms, but this was my *wife*. I couldn't come at Mary with a feint-shift-and-kill.

But the slug had no compunctions about me. Mary—or *it*—was giving me everything she had, and I had all I could do to keep from killing her. I had to keep her from killing me—and I had to kill the slug—and I had to keep the slug from getting at me or I would not be able to save her.



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I let go with one hand and jabbed her chin. The blow did not even slow her down. I grabbed again, with both arms and legs, trying to encase her in a bear hug to immobilize her without injuring her. We went down, Mary on top. I shoved my head under her chin to stop her from biting me.

Curbing her strong body by sheer muscle, I tried to paralyze her with nerve pressure, but she knew the key spots as well as I

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did. I was lucky that I was not myself paralyzed.

There was one thing left that I could do: clutch the slug. But I knew the shattering effect that had on the host. It might kill her; it was sure to hurt her horribly. I wanted to make her unconscious, then remove the slug gently before I killed it . . . drive it off with heat or force it to turn loose with mild shocks.

Drive it off with heat—

I was given no time to develop the idea; she got her teeth in my ear. I shifted my right arm and grabbed at the slug.

NOTHING happened. Instead of my fingers sinking into it, I found that this slug had a leathery covering. It was as if I had clutched a football! Mary jerked when I touched it and took away part of my ear, but there was no bone-crushing spasm; the slug was still alive and in control.

I tried to get my fingers under it. It clung like a suction cup. My fingers would not go under.

In the meantime I was suffering damages in other places. I rolled over and got to my knees, still hugging her. I had to let her legs free and that was bad, but I bent her across a hip and struggled to my feet.

I dragged and carried her to the fireplace.

She almost got away from me; it was like wrestling a mountain lion. But I got her there, grabbed her mop of hair and slowly forced her shoulders over the fire.

I meant only to singe the slug, force it to drop off to escape that heat. But she struggled so hard that I slipped, banging my own head against the arch of the opening and dropping her shoulders against the coals.

She screamed and bounded out of the fire, carrying me with her. I struggled to my feet, still dazed by the wallop, and saw her collapsed on the floor. Her beautiful hair and her negligee were burning!

I slapped at them both with my hands. The slug was no longer on her. Still crushing the flames with my hands, I glanced around and saw it lying on the floor by the fireplace—and the Pirate was sniffing at it.

"Get away from there!" I yelled. "Pirate! Stop that!"

The cat looked up inquiringly. I went on making certain that the fire was out. When I was sure, I left her; there was not even time to see if she was still alive. What I wanted was the fireplace shovel; I did not dare risk touching the thing with my hands. I turned to get it.

But the slug was no longer on the floor; it had gotten Pirate. The cat was standing rigid, feet wide apart, and the slug was set-

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tling into place. I dived at Pirate and got him by his hind legs just as he made his first possessed movement.

Handling a frenzied cat with bare hands is reckless at best; controlling one which is already controlled by a titan is impossible. Hands and arms being slashed by claws and teeth at every step, I hurried to the fireplace again. Despite Pirate's wails and struggles, I forced the slug against the coals and held it there, cat fur and my hands alike burning, until the slug dropped off directly into the flames. Then I took Pirate out and laid him on the floor. He was no longer struggling. I made sure that he was no longer burning anywhere, and went back to Mary.

She was still unconscious. I squatted down beside her and sobbed.

AN hour later I had done what I could for Mary. Her hair was gone from the left side of her head and there were burns on shoulders and neck. But her pulse was strong, her respiration steady, though fast and light, and I did not judge that she would lose much body fluid. I dressed her burns—I keep a full stock of medical stuff out there in the country—and gave her an injection to make her sleep. Then I had time for Pirate.

He was still where I had left him and he did not look good. He had gotten it much worse than Mary and probably flame in his lungs as well. He was lying so still, I thought he was dead, but he lifted his head when I touched him.

"I'm sorry, old fellow," I whispered. I think I heard him mew.

I did for him what I had done for Mary, except that I was afraid to give him a soporific. After that I went into the bathroom and looked myself over carefully.

The ear had stopped bleeding; I decided to ignore it. My hands were what bothered me. I stuck them under hot water and yelped, then dried them in the air blast and that hurt, too. I could not figure out how I could dress them, and, besides, I needed to use them.

Finally I dumped about an ounce of the jelly for burns into each of a pair of plastic gloves and put them on. The stuff included a local anesthetic; that would help me get by. Then I went to the stereophone and called the village medical man. I explained what had happened and what I had done about it and asked him to please come up at once.

"At *night?*" he said. "You must be joking."

I said that the hell I was.

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He answered, "Don't ask the impossible, man. Yours makes the fourth alarm in this county; nobody goes out at night. I'll stop in and see your wife first thing in the morning, when it's safe."

I told him where to go first thing in the morning and switched off.

Pirate died a little after midnight. I buried him at once so that Mary would not see him. Digging hurt my hands, but he did not need a very big hole. I said good-by to him and came back in. Mary was resting quietly; I brought a chair to the bed and watched over her. Probably I dozed from time to time; I can't be sure.

—ROBERT A. HEINLEIN

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"Get back from those controls, Bat Durston," the tall stranger lipped thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last space trip through this particular section of the Universe."

Hoofs drumming, Bat Durston came galloping down through the narrow pass at Eagle Gulch, a tiny gold colony 400 miles north of Tombstone. He spurred hard for a low overhang of rimrock . . . and at that point, a tall, lean wrangler stepped out from behind a high boulder, six-shooter in a sun-tanned hand.

"Rear back and dismount, Bat Durston," the tall stranger lipped thinly. "You don't know it, but this is your last saddle-jaunt through these here parts."

Sound alike? They should—one is merely a western transplanted to some alien and impossible planet. If this is your idea of science fiction, you're welcome to it. YOU'LL NEVER FIND IT IN GALAXY!

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